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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from a study of school-based instructional decision making (SBIDM) and the regional staff development centers for SBIDM in Maryland. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and a group process adapted from storyboarding. Informants included school-improvement teams, principals, other faculty in seven schools, regional center steering committees, and assistant superintendents. Findings indicate that SBIDM was well under way in the regional centers' service area. Teams worked collaboratively to reach decisions, used consensus-building techniques, produced improvement plans, and generally implemented their plans. Participants reported that they and their schools had gained significant benefits from SBIDM. Most of the benefits were related to the cooperative planning process. Although informants perceived the program as beneficial, they said they needed increased involvement from parents, teachers, and students; more time, money, staff, training, and ideas; changes in the school system and state policies, changes in SBIDM procedures within schools; and more data and understanding about change. Finally, respondents reported that the program provided high-quality consultants, materials, and resources; increased their awareness and knowledge about SBIDM and school reform, contributed to the implementation of SBIDM and school improvement efforts; and enhanced the capacity of school systems to support school improvement. Contains 11 tables and 4 references. (LMI)

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"The Way It's Supposed To Be": A Report on School-Based Instructional Decisionmaking and the Regional Centers in Maryland

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October 1994

Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to be the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, serving Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia. As one of ten federally-supported regional educational laboratories, RBS' mission for the past 28 years has been to collaborate with state, intermediate, and local educational agencies to improve district, school, and classroom practice. RBS is a non-profit corporation, governed by a Board of Directors made up of educational and community leaders from its region.

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Note: Sections are divided by pictures that illustrate selected aspects of SBIDM. These images were composed and signed by small groups of school improvement team members in selected study schools.

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a study of school-based instructional decisionmaking (SBIDM) and the regional staff development centers for SBIDM in Maryland. The report described the impact of the regional centers in terms of the implementation and stakeholders' perceptions of SBIDM in the centers' service area, and perceptions of the regional centers.

Study questions on implementation addressed the extent to which: functioning school improvement teams existed; teams involved other staff, parents, and community; school improvement plans were data-based; and school improvement plans were implemented, monitored, and adjusted as necessary. Other questions on implementation sought to understand the school system context for SBIDM. Questions about stakeholders' perceptions of SBIDM had to do with the quality and utility of improvement plans, the status of SBIDM overall, as well as strengths and needs for improvement in SBIDM. Questions about the regional centers elicited stakeholders' perceptions of strengths and needs for improvement in the centers themselves.

Data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, and a group process adapted from storyboarding. Informants included school improvement teams, principals and selected others on the teams, and other faculty in seven schools, assistant superintendents, and regional centers' steering committees. The seven study schools were located in three Eastern Shore school systems and four administrative areas within Prince George's County. Assistant superintendents represented five Eastern Shore school systems and two administrative areas in Prince George's County. Steering committees in Baltimore City and Prince George's County included teachers, principals, other school-based staff, central office and area administrators, regional center coordinators, and others. In all, more than 180 people provided information for the study.

Implementation of SBIDM

Taken together, the findings suggest that SBIDM was well under way in the regional centers' service area. The seven study schools provided evidence of the following.

- School improvement teams were universally in place. These teams consisted mostly of teachers and all but one included at least minimal representation from parents. Support staff and central office staff were less visible on teams. The teams met and conducted their business at times and locations unique to each school.
- Teams worked collaboratively to reach decisions. In most cases, they perceived principals as team members, not leaders, even though principals sometimes convened these groups, brought specialized information to bear, and were subject to direct school system control as to their schools' objectives for improvement planning. Team members on the whole considered principals to play clear and appropriate roles on their teams.

- Teams used various group processes and techniques to facilitate their efficiency and/or effectiveness and to promote collaboration. A number of these processes and techniques could be traced to regional centers' training.
- All teams involved other groups in their deliberations and decisionmaking, albeit in highly idiosyncratic ways. The groups that teams involved consisted of preexisting groups like subject matter departments and grade clusters, groups constituted expressly for planning purposes, or a combination of these. On the whole, professional staff were most involved, while support staff, parents, and community were less involved, if at all.
- Teams reported reaching decisions through consensus, a term that turned out to have multiple meanings. In all the schools, consensus meant a protracted, iterative process of crafting or validating only those decisions that had widespread support throughout a school. Team decisions were routinely treated as provisional until there were indications that constituents accepted it. Some schools also used consensus to mean a technique for measuring agreement, in contrast to voting.
- Team members supported decisions once they were made. Their support was due in large part to the consensual process of decisionmaking within the team. It was also due to team members' roles as ambassadors or liaisons to constituent groups where they explained the thinking behind decisions and answered questions.
- All schools produced improvement plans. These plans usually reflected state and local goals. However, data informed planning unevenly across the schools. While all schools consulted a variety of data sources, they differed in the extent to which the data influenced their selection of specific objectives (if their plans included objectives) and activities.
- Schools generally implemented their plans. School-based monitoring of implementation was usually informal and tended to be modest. Similarly, schools, with notable exceptions, attended to evaluation and adjusted their plans only as they labored to produce the next annual improvement plan.

Local school systems affected SBIDM in various ways. These included delimiting the types of decisions schools could make, requiring schools to conform to guidelines for plan content and format, and controlling resources. School systems also influenced SBIDM through their routine supervision of principals, whom they held accountable for school performance. School systems reviewed schools' improvement plans but varied in the amount and type of feedback they provided.

Perceptions of SBIDM

Stakeholders perceived that they and their schools had reaped significant benefits from SBIDM. At this stage of their SBIDM implementation, most of these benefits related to the improvement planning process and the plan, rather than the achievement of student performance outcomes.

Stakeholders described school improvement plans as substantive and useful. Assistant superintendents who reviewed the plans declared the quality to be satisfactory on the whole. Team members and other school staff attested to plans' utility. They described various ways in which the

plans were not only helpful guides to school improvement, but valuable also in focusing attention on common needs, clarifying priorities, and increasing commitment.

All the schools were "on the way" or "there" as to full implementation of SBIDM, according to selected team members in the study schools. Team members in all the schools, including those who rated themselves the lowest, cited evidence of significant progress in implementing SBIDM. Similarly, all the schools, even those with the highest ratings, also identified ways in which their SBIDM implementation was imperfect or incomplete. High schools in the study gave themselves relatively lower rating than other schools.

Team members in all the schools perceived SBIDM strengths to outweigh by far needs for SBIDM improvement. Perceived strengths and needs both related to school improvement and stakeholder involvement. In descending order, team members perceived SBIDM strengths as:

- improved commitment
- improved ideas
- a focus on goals and needs
- enhanced self-efficacy
- improved decisions
- improved relationships
- improved implementation of decisions
- improved results and understanding about policies and programs.

Teams perceived SBIDM needs for improvement in terms of:

- more involvement from staff, parents, and students
- more time
- more money and staff
- changes in school system and state policies
- more training
- changes in SBIDM procedures within schools
- more ideas
- more data and understanding about change.

Perceptions of the Regional Centers

The perceived strengths of all three regional centers clearly outnumbered the perceived needs for improvement. Some common strengths emerged across the regional centers, despite major differences in history and program. These strengths essentially document the centers' critical role in providing support for SBIDM in schools and school systems.

- The regional centers brought high-quality staff development on SBIDM and school improvement within schools' reach. Steering committees celebrated the fact that the centers brought high-caliber trainers and consultants in contact with school teams, principals, and parents. They also indicated that the centers developed and/or made available highly

regarded materials and other resources. All of the nearly 500 schools in the centers' area, which covered 11 of Maryland's 24 school systems, participated in one or more ways.

- The regional centers increased the awareness, knowledge, and skills of school-based staff as to SBIDM and school improvement. Steering committees noted that the centers' staff development opportunities kept pace with the needs of the diverse populations they served. Center offerings reflected not only the range of needs across schools, but also the progression of needs within schools. As a consequence, steering committees reported evidence of practitioners' development of awareness, knowledge, and skills.
- The regional centers contributed to the implementation of SBIDM and school improvement efforts. Specifically, steering committees reported gains in the quality of improvement planning, schools' and school systems' clarity about their needs, and their active seeking of resources to meet school improvement needs. Minigrants from the centers also enabled some specific needs to be met. These results constitute significant progress toward the centers' major goal: increased implementation of SBIDM and improvement planning.
- The regional centers also enhanced the capacity of school systems to support school improvement. Steering committees indicated that the centers had helped schools systems by identifying systemwide and school-specific needs, performing assorted staff development planning functions, and facilitating systemwide reflection and coordination of reform efforts. Systemwide planning was placed on a stronger footing, resulting in better plans and more complete implementation at the school-system level.

There were few common areas for needed improvement. The needs identified in all three regional centers mostly concerned calls for more programs and products. Included were the need to serve new and/or expanded audiences (especially principals, but also assorted others), and the need to emphasize various topics or to add content, given unaddressed or newly emerging needs. Needs identified in at least two of the three regional centers included calls for more monitoring and evaluation by the centers, more time for planning and training, more opportunities to network across regions, broader and more meaningful local involvement in SBIDM, and better communication within local school systems.

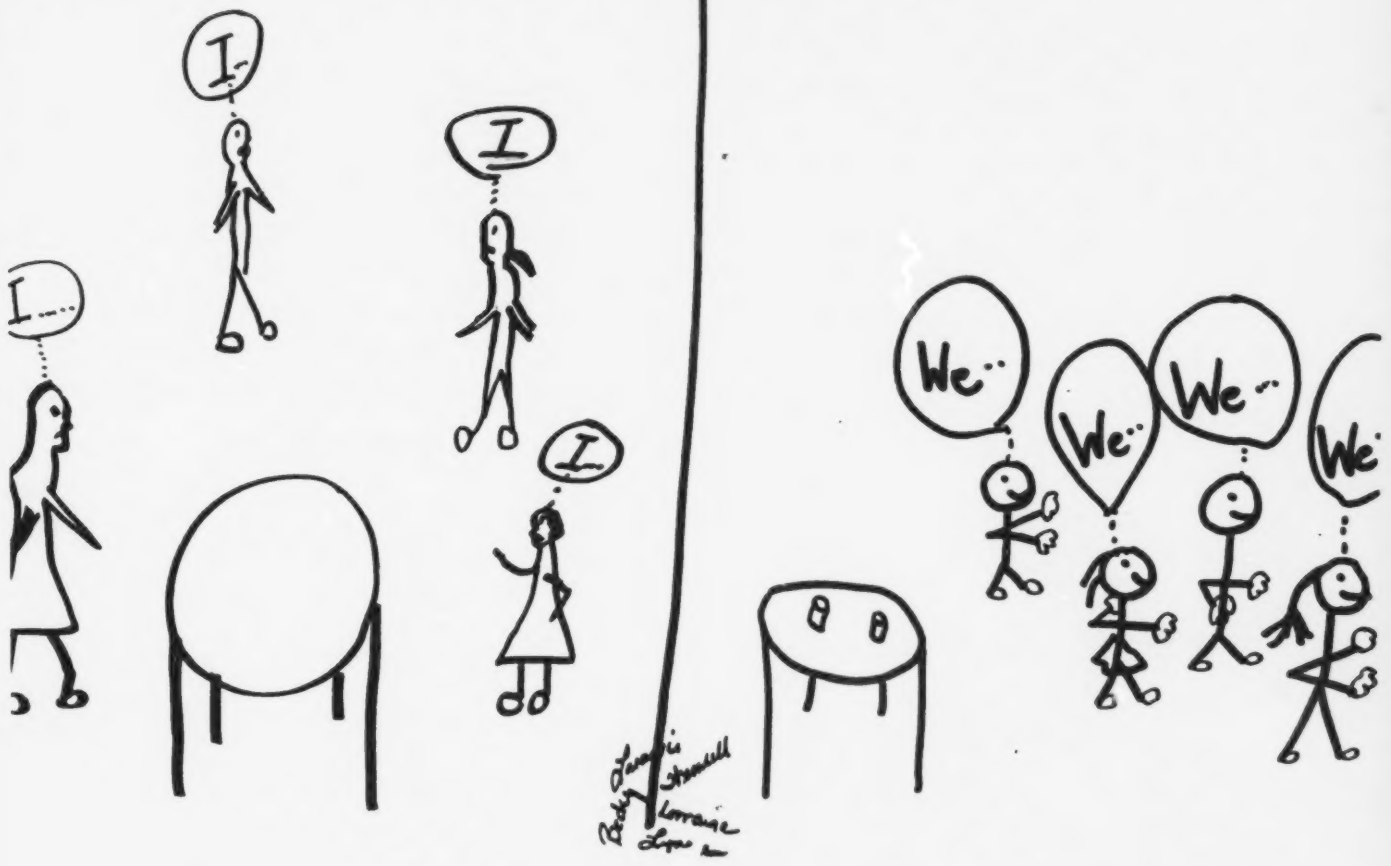
Reflection

A brief analysis concluded that Maryland's experience with SBIDM and the regional centers matches to a large extent the theory on what it takes for school-based management to work. The study provides assurance that schools and school systems are working toward school improvement through SBIDM with the help of the regional centers. It also provides evidence of strengths and needs for improvement from the perspectives of various stakeholders. As schools and school systems work with the regional centers and the state to build on strengths and fill needs for improvement, they will be better equipped to show the gains in school performance for which SBIDM was initiated.

Team Meetings

At the beginning.....

Afterwards....



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Introduction

This report presents selected findings from a study on the implementation and perceptions of school-based instructional decisionmaking and perceptions of regional staff development centers in Maryland. The study was undertaken for the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the regional centers, and their 11 constituent school systems to supplement other information describing the centers' activities and the number of teachers, administrators and parents they have served. Study findings reflect the status of school-based instructional decisionmaking (SBIDM) implementation, and perceptions of SBIDM and the regional centers at the point that centers had been operating for almost two years.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the background and state context for SBIDM and the regional centers. The chapter then describes study questions and methods. It concludes with an outline of how this report is organized.

Background

SBIDM was mandated in 1990 by MSDE as part of the Maryland School Performance Program, a component of Schools for Success, the state's major accountability and school improvement initiative. SBIDM was required in all schools as the means for preparing improvement plans. Annual improvement plans were required as of December, 1992, in order for schools to address state and/or local goals for which they had not yet met established standards. School improvement teams, to be composed largely of teachers but also of parents, community representatives, and students at the secondary level, were to be set up in all schools. They were to be responsible for working collaboratively within their school communities to produce, implement, monitor, and adjust these plans.

MSDE defined SBIDM only in general terms, leaving local school systems to operationalize the definition for themselves. According to MSDE, the scope of SBIDM extended to curriculum and instruction, as well as to other areas affecting the attainment of school performance goals. Individual school systems could enlarge the boundaries of SBIDM if they chose.

The regional staff development centers were authorized in the fall of 1991 to support the implementation of SBIDM. The centers were conceived as a collaborative partnership between MSDE and the school systems they would serve. The Metro center was created to serve Baltimore City and Prince George's County, two large systems in metropolitan areas. These two school systems were approximately the same size and accounted for a combined total of about 350 schools and over 200,000 students K-12. The Eastern Shore regional staff development center, operated by the Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium, was created to serve nine small, rural school systems. The nine include some of the state's most and least wealthy school systems, and together accounted for 130 schools and about 60,000 students K-12.[1]

The regional centers effort was allocated $1,000,000 a year for three years. The Eastern Shore regional center received upwards of $400,000 per year, as did Prince George's County and Baltimore City combined, with the balance held by MSDE. In actuality, the grant period was extended to compensate for episodic gaps in funding and service.

Governance of the centers reflected multiple layers of collaboration between the state and local school systems. An executive committee called the Friday Group consisted of state and local representatives and selected others. The Friday Group crafted initial policies, guidelines, and SBIDM indicators. The Eastern Shore, Baltimore City, and Prince George's County each appointed a coordinator and steering committee, who shared responsibility for program planning (subject to review by the Friday Group and MSDE), implementation, and evaluation. The Metro center's two steering committees operated independently of each other from the outset. Thus, this report refers to Baltimore City and Prince George's County as distinct centers, bringing the total number of regional centers in Maryland to three instead of two.

After they conducted a coordinated but customized needs assessment, the centers offered their first training activities in the summer of 1992. Their activities for 1992 and 1993 are summarized below.

Baltimore City

The Baltimore City steering committee was composed of teachers, school-based and central office administrators, and community and parent representatives. The 15 or so members periodically conducted broad-scale needs assessments. The first of these, in 1992, included responses from parents and community members in each school community, in addition to teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals.

The Baltimore City regional center offered training for parents on an ongoing basis. The center also implemented a training series for members of professional development cadres in every school. Cadres in their turn were to help train improvement teams and other school staff in relation to their improvement plans. Awareness training for principals was included early in the life of the center.

The Baltimore City regional center pioneered the development of the minigrants program which Prince George's County later adapted. Over two years, about 100 minigrants were awarded to schools. Intensive team development work was initiated toward the end of 1993.

Eastern Shore

The Eastern Shore steering committee was composed entirely of assistant superintendents and other central office administrators from the nine constituent school systems. They collectively planned regional programs and individually planned auxiliary local programs for SBIDM and/or school improvement activities. Regional programs were designed to include follow-ups to the extent possible. Local programs using regional center support varied widely across school systems. They consisted of a broad range of school improvement activities, including minigrants and system-specific follow-ups to regional programs.

The emphasis for regional activities in 1992 was on establishing fundamental knowledge and skills related to SBIDM, Dimensions of Learning, and parent involvement, as indicated on the initial needs assessment. Representative school teams of key administrators, teachers, and selected parents participated.

In response to two additional needs assessments, the regional emphasis in 1993 was on the development of school improvement teams, performance assessment, and promising programs and practices, including Dimensions of Learning. In addition, seminars were offered for administrators on the basis of requests. Seminar topics included effective schools, outcomes-based education, and creative scheduling.

Participants in every regional activity came from all nine school systems. Since its inception, the Eastern Shore regional center has provided services for a total of over 1500 teachers, school-based and central office administrators, and parents. Participation in local activities under the auspices of the regional center accounted for more than double that number.

Prince George's County

Prince George's County came to the state's SBIDM effort from years of prior experience at reforms which included various phases of school-based planning. In this large and complex school system, the steering committee took pains to communicate the connection among the disparate school improvement efforts, to coordinate the training opportunities related to them, and to enlist the cooperation of the school system's line administrators and widely dispersed staff developers.

The Prince George's County steering committee consisted of from 15 to 20 members. These included teachers, principals, and area and central office staff. The steering committee assessed needs periodically and collected feedback regularly to provide guidance for the planning of follow-up and additional activities. These data-gathering efforts included pre- and post-tests, other forms of written feedback, and group interviews.

Prince George's County concentrated its regional center's funding on Dimensions of Learning and team development. The steering committee provided sustained, comprehensive training in Dimensions of Learning for teachers and administrators at all levels in the system in 1992 and 1993. This included the development and updating of training materials and teaching guides to include Dimensions.

The steering committee made available team development training in several different types and venues. Other activities sponsored by the regional center included one cycle of minigrants and some initial awareness activities for principals.

Study Questions

The study sought to describe the impact of the regional centers in terms of stakeholders' implementation and perceptions of SBIDM, and perceptions of the regional centers themselves. Accordingly, the study examined implementation and perceptions of SBIDM in a sample of schools which have experienced one or more of the regional centers' programs and services, and in a sample of central offices of school systems where the regional centers have operated. Study questions about

SBIDM were based on MSDE's definition of SBIDM and the Friday Group's indicators of SBIDM in place. The study also explored stakeholders' perceptions of the regional centers. Study questions consisted of the following.

- To what extent is SBIDM being implemented in the regional centers' area? Specifically, to what extent do functioning school improvement teams exist and involve other staff, parents, and community? To what extent do schools produce improvement plans and are the plans based on performance and other data? To what extent are school improvement plans implemented, monitored, and adjusted as necessary? Informants included principals, selected members of school improvement teams, other faculty, and assistant superintendents.
- What is the local school system context for SBIDM? Specifically, what are the SBIDM policies and procedures in local school systems and how do they affect school improvement planning? Informants were principals and assistant superintendents.
- What are stakeholders' perceptions about the quality and utility of school improvement plans? Informants were principals, selected members of school improvement teams, other faculty, and assistant superintendents.
- What are stakeholders' perceptions about the extent to which SBIDM is being implemented? Informants were principals and selected members of school improvement teams.
- What do stakeholders perceive to be the strengths and needed improvements in SBIDM? Informants were the full complement of school improvement teams' members.
- What do stakeholders perceive to be the strengths and improvements needed in the regional centers? Informants were the regional centers' steering committees.

Supplementing this study is information collected by the regional center coordinators which describes participants' reactions to the content and delivery of the centers' programs and services, stakeholders' needs, and perceptions of the status of SBIDM. That information is derived from the centers' various feedback surveys, needs assessments, and periodic soundings on SBIDM. The coordinators and their steering committees have used that information as a basis for their program planning. It is available from MSDE and is not included in this report.

This study did not examine the impact of SBIDM and the regional centers in terms of school performance. MSDE had mandated SBIDM statewide and established the regional centers in the expectation and hope that they would stimulate improved school performance in due time. However, MSDE and the study designers agreed that it was too early to measure impact in terms of school performance.[2] The study was designed, therefore, to show the extent of changes in practice and attitudes with respect to SBIDM and the nature of the regional centers' contribution to them.

Study Methods

Information for the study was gathered in the late fall and early winter of 1993-94. Summaries of study methods and informants are provided in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 lists the information-gathering techniques and the informants groups which were involved in each. Table 2 shows the number and affiliation of all informant groups except for steering committees.

As shown in Table 1, storyboarding, individual interviews, and focus group sessions were used to gather information. Informants consisted of school teams, other faculty, principals, assistant superintendents, and steering committees. Over 180 individuals contributed information to this study.

Table 1
Study Methods and Informants

Informants	Methods		
	Storyboarding	Individual Interview	Focus Group
School improvement teams[a]	•	•	
Other faculty			•
Principals[b]	•	•	
Assistant superintendents[c]		•	
Steering committees	•		

[a] In addition to participating in the storyboarding activity, two or three members also participated in individual interviews.
[b] Principals participated in storyboarding with their school improvement teams.
[c] Two of the assistant superintendents also participated in storyboarding as members of their steering committee.

The storyboarding exercise was used to obtain individual perceptions in a group setting. The activity, which is described in detail elsewhere in this report, lasted 60 minutes and elicited school improvement teams' comments on the strengths and needed improvements in SBIDM, and steering committees' comments on the strengths and needed improvements in the regional centers.[3] Principals participated in the storyboarding activity with their teams.

In addition to participating in storyboarding, principals and two to three other team members in each school were interviewed individually. The majority of these team members were teachers, but support staff and a parent were also involved. Individual interviews with principals and other team members used a combination of forced choice and open-ended items on the subject of team functioning, school improvement planning, and SBIDM implementation. Interviews with principals lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, while interviews with team members lasted about 45 minutes. These interviews were conducted face-to-face except for three interviews with principals, which were conducted by telephone following an on-site visit.

Individual interviews were also conducted with assistant superintendents. These interviews consisted of open-ended items. Interviews with assistant superintendents dealt with school systems' SBIDM policies and procedures, the quality of school improvement planning and implementation, and the strengths and needed improvements in the regional centers. Interviews with Eastern Shore superintendents also included discussion of the programs and services that their respective school systems had provided under the auspices of the regional center. Conducted in person or by

telephone, they lasted 45 minutes on average. Assistant superintendents in Prince George's County also participated in the storyboarding activity with their steering committee.

The study convened one or two focus groups in each school to explore their perceptions of school improvement teams and improvement planning in their schools. Focus groups were made up of three to four teachers who were not currently members of their school improvement teams.[4] They are shown as "other faculty" in Table 1. The focus groups responded to open-ended questions during a 30-minute session.

Table 2
Selected Study Informants by School System

School Systems and Schools	Informants			
	School Improvement Team Members[a]	Other Faculty	Principal	Assistant. Superintendent[b]
Eastern Shore A: Elementary School	13	3	1	1
Eastern Shore B: Middle School	17	6	1	1
Eastern Shore C: High School	20	6	1	1
Eastern Shore D	--	--	--	1
Eastern Shore E	--	--	--	1
Prince George's A: Elementary School	8	3	1	1
Prince George's B: Special Center	13	8[c]	1	1
Prince George's C: Middle School	18	6	1	--
Prince George's D: High School	26	6	2[d]	--

[a]These are estimates based on the size of the full team. In most cases, team members' attendance for the structured team activity was close to perfect, although exact counts were not made.

[b]Assistant superintendents included members of the steering committees who held the rank, if not always the title, of assistant superintendent.

[c]Other faculty in this instance included four teacher assistants at the school's request.

[d]The principal and assistant principal in this school were interviewed together at the school's request.

As shown in Table 2, school teams, other faculty, principals, and assistant superintendents were drawn from seven schools and seven school systems in the service area of the Eastern Shore and Prince George's County regional centers. Three of the seven schools were located on the Eastern Shore, with each coming from a different school system. The remaining four schools were located in different administrative areas of the Prince George's County school system.

For the purposes of this study, administrative areas are treated as separate school systems. Administrative areas served just over 30 schools each, and area superintendents, while holding the

title of assistant superintendents in the county, functioned with a great deal of autonomy with respect to the schools in their areas.

The seven schools in the sample were drawn from more than 60 which had participated in intensive team development and others which had received minigrants from the centers. Center coordinators, working with assistant superintendents, nominated schools. Criteria considered in the selection included diversity and representativeness as to level (elementary, middle, high, and special education center), student demographics, school system size, and geographic dispersion. Other considerations included the schools' representativeness as to the quality and quantity of experience with SBIDM.

Data were collected from teams, individual team members, other faculty, and most principals during study visits lasting from half to a full day at each school. Team members for interviews and other faculty for focus groups were selected by principals under guidelines from the study designers. The guidelines essentially asked for diversity in informants as to duties, experience, age, race, and sex, to the extent possible. The regional centers and MSDE made funds available for substitutes and refreshments.

Data were collected from assistant superintendents in school systems where five of the seven study schools were located, as well as two additional school systems on the Eastern Shore.[5] These assistant superintendents were nominated by their regional center coordinators. The five assistant superintendents from the Eastern Shore represented diverse school systems as to size and location. The two assistant superintendents from Prince George's County represented different amounts of experience in the role. All seven had direct knowledge of the centers from serving on their respective steering committees.

Baltimore City was not included in the portion of the study related to the implementation and perceptions of SBIDM, although the study design called for it. The reasons include delays in nominating schools and in implementing team training. Absent prior experience with SBIDM, even schools which had received minigrants from Baltimore City's regional center were not considered sufficiently touched by SBIDM in 1993-94 to contribute to the study.

Organization of the Report

The rest of this report is organized in three sections.

- The first section presents study findings related to the implementation and perceptions of SBIDM. Chapters 1 and 2, "SBIDM Inside Seven Schools" and "Local School Systems' SBIDM Guidelines and Plan Reviews," deal with implementation. Chapters 3 through 5, "Status of SBIDM," "Strengths of SBIDM," and "Needed Improvements in SBIDM," discuss stakeholders' perceptions of SBIDM.
- The second section of the report presents findings related to steering committee members' perceptions of the regional centers. Findings from Baltimore City, the Eastern Shore, and Prince George's County are treated separately in chapters 6 through 8.
- The last section of this report consists of chapter 9, which summarizes the findings and reflects briefly on them.

Sections are divided by pictures that illustrate selected aspects of SBIDM. These images were composed and signed by small groups of school improvement team members in selected study schools.

Endnotes

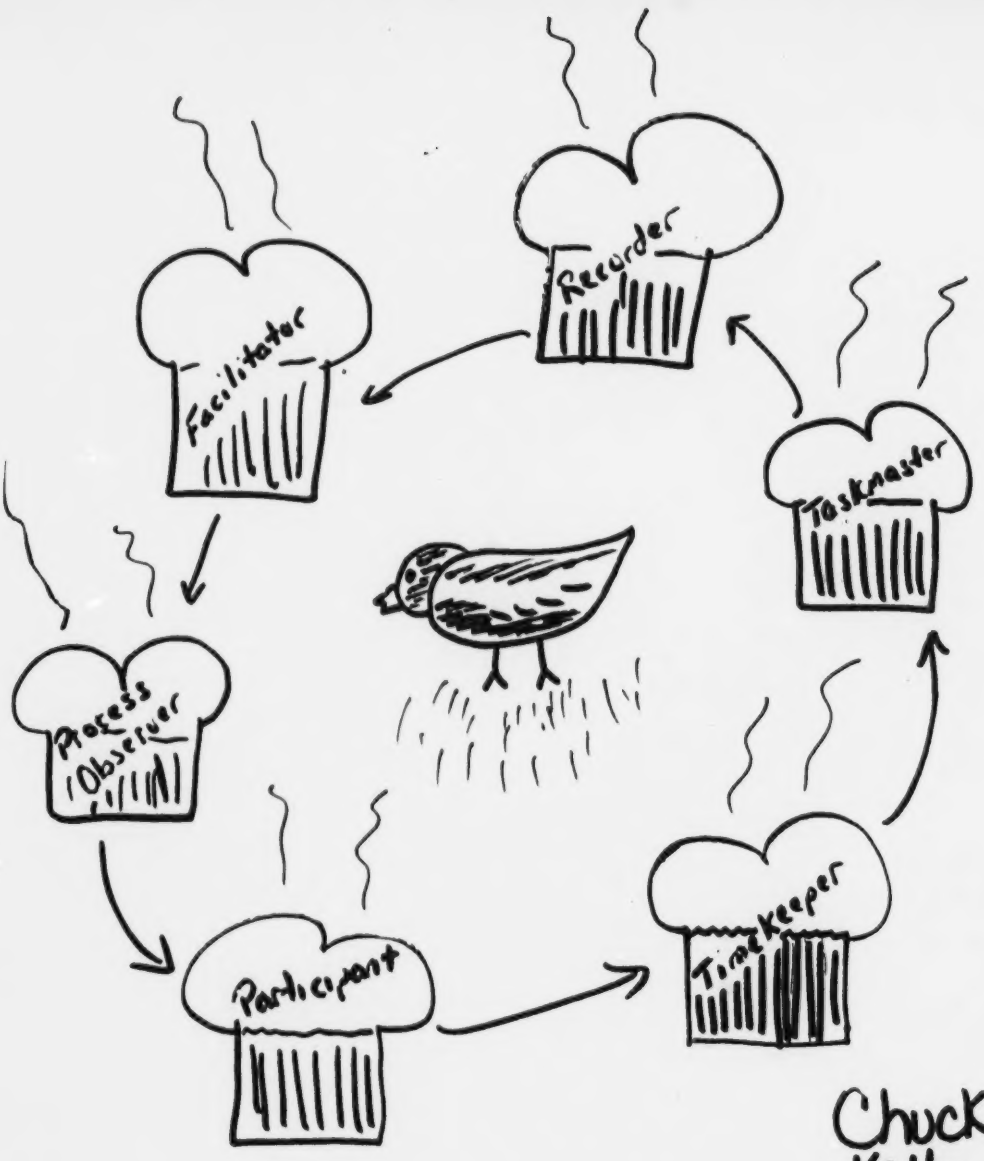
[1]The school systems served by the Eastern Shore regional center were Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico, and Worcester.

[2]Study designers were the author and a staff member from MSDE's division of research and evaluation, assisted by the Friday Group.

[3]See the first endnote in Chapter 4, on page 30, for a description of the storyboarding activity. Team composition is described in Chapter 1.

[4]In one school, one of the focus groups was composed of teacher assistants.

[5]This group of informants included individuals who held the title and/or position equivalent to that of assistant superintendent.



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Part I: Implementation and Perceptions of SBIDM

SBIDM Inside Seven Schools 1

A cornerstone of SBIDM and school improvement in Maryland is the school improvement team. This chapter begins with an introduction to school improvement teams in the seven study schools as to their nomenclature, composition, size, and meeting schedules. The chapter continues with a closer look at the workings of these teams. It treats the structure and organization of decisionmaking, and the principal's role on the team. The chapter goes on to consider collaboration within teams, how decisions are reached, and the degree to which members support decisions once they are reached. The chapter concludes with a focus on school improvement plans. It describes some of the goals and data included in those plans and school-based staff's perceptions about the value of plans for guiding school improvement.

This picture of how teams work was assembled from individual interviews with school improvement team members and focus group sessions with other faculty. As in subsequent sections, comments are identified by school. ES refers to the Eastern Shore and PG refers to Prince George's County. These designations are followed by a lower case letter: "e" denotes elementary, "s" denotes special center, "m" denotes middle, and "h" denotes high school.

Introduction to School Improvement Teams

By definition, a school improvement team was operating in each of the seven schools studied. Each included teachers and principals. Most included other staff as well, and all but one included parents. All bore some responsibility for producing school improvement plans.

Table 3 profiles the school improvement teams in the seven schools. In a number of respects, the teams varied almost more than they resembled each other. For example, they went by slightly different names. Some were known as the "school improvement team," or SIT for short, while others were known as a "management team," "committee," or "council." Teams also varied in size from 12 to 26 members. The variance in size was due largely but not entirely to staff size. Differences in how members were selected and how teams were structured also influenced team size.

Teams selected their members in a variety of ways. Members were elected on some teams, were appointed on others, and volunteered on still others. Some teams used a combination of these methods to arrive at their membership.

In the six teams which included parents, the number of parent members ranged from one to three. Parents in at least one school also served on subcommittees attached to the team. However, members of several teams reported that parents found it difficult to attend team meetings.

Members on the one school improvement team without a parent indicated that they struggled continuously with deciding what constituted appropriate representation and with sharing staff concerns with "the public." All teams had developed channels for getting information to parent bodies and parents at large.

Table 3
School Improvement Teams: Profile of Membership and Meetings

Schools	Team Name	Number of Team Members	Parent on Team	Selection of School-Based Team Members	Team Meeting Schedule
ES Elementary	School Improvement Team	13	NO	Representatives from grade and specialty teams Others as needed Staff may recommend	1x/month and as needed, includes home dinners
ES Middle	School Improvement Team	17	YES	Representatives from each grade and subject Members select their replacements 3-year term	1x/month includes home dinners, Saturdays
ES High	SIT Committee	20	YES	Some originally selected by principal Some volunteers	2x/month, 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, includes after school and dinners
PG Elementary	Management Council	12	YES	Representatives from grade and area teams, selected by those teams At-large member selected by staff Teacher association representative	1x/month, 3rd Monday
PG Special Center	Management Team	20	YES	Teacher representatives from grade and area teams Others include support teachers and custodian Service voluntary	1x/month, 1st Wednesday
PG Middle	School-Based Management Committee	18	YES	Department chairs, who serve in that capacity for 2 years	2x/month, before school, and as needed
PG High	School-Based Management Team	26	YES	Teacher representatives from each department Representatives from resource staff Representatives from support staff	1x/month, 1st Monday, after school

Meeting schedules also differed across the seven teams. Although a number of teams reported meeting weekly around the time school improvement plans were due, the frequency and duration of meetings in more normal periods differed across teams. Some met once a month, others twice. Most teams routinely met for 45 minutes per meeting, but others blocked out several hours.

Most teams had settled on a regular time and place for meetings. Some met before school, others after. One team occasionally scheduled Saturday meetings during the school year. Two teams had not settled on a regular time and place, but accommodated divergent personal schedules and

preferences by shifting time of day and venue from meeting to meeting. These teams sometimes met in members' homes and shared meals as part of their meetings. Most teams had also worked during the summer.

These, then, are seven school improvement teams at a glance. It is the members of these teams who, along with other faculty, discussed how SBIDM worked in their schools. Various features of SBIDM are described in the following sections. Selected features of SBIDM are summarized on Table 4.

Table 4
Selected Features of SBIDM

Schools	Team's Main Decisionmaking Partners	Principal's Role on Team		Examples of Team's Group Processes	Examples of Data Sources Beyond MSPP[a]
		Usual Convenor	Member, Not Leader		
ES Elementary	-- Grade-level teams -- Subcommittees	NO	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus -- Brainstorming -- Round-robin -- Roles for members	-- Reading levels -- District referrals -- Attendance histories
ES Middle	-- Subcommittees -- Whole faculty	YES	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus/Voting -- Brainstorming -- Round-robin -- Roles for members	-- Climate -- Equity -- Books read
ES High	-- Subcommittees -- Whole faculty	NO	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus -- Brainstorming -- Roles for members -- Fun and food	-- Climate -- Dropout reasons
PG Elementary	-- Grade-level teams -- Subcommittees	YES	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus/Voting -- Problem-solving	-- Basal tests -- Math pacing -- Grade distributions
PG Special Center	-- Grade-level teams -- Whole faculty	YES	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus/Voting -- Brainstorming -- Round-robin -- Problem-solving -- Fun and food	-- Botel tests -- IEP goals -- Parent conferences -- Attendance histories
PG Middle	-- Grade-level teams -- Subject-matter departments -- Subcommittees	YES	NO	-- Small groups -- Brainstorming	-- Writing samples
PG High	-- Subject-matter departments -- Whole faculty	NO	YES	-- Small groups -- Consensus -- Brainstorming -- Round-robin -- Problem-solving	-- Parent meetings -- Attendance histories -- Grade analysis -- Suspensions

[a]In addition to state data-based areas.

Structure and Organization of Decisionmaking

While the state specifically charged school improvement teams with major responsibilities for SBIDM, teams did not do this work alone. Teams in the study schools interacted with grade groups, subject matter teams or departments, school committees, the faculty as a whole, individual staff members, and sometimes parent and/or student groups. Who was involved, how they were involved, and where decisions about school improvement were really made varied to some extent across the schools.

The decisionmaking process was iterative rather than neatly sequenced. As a team member recounted the development of PGm's school plan:

> We revised that sucker four times. We went back to the faculty [in departments] several times to get their opinions: "Is there something we should include? Is there something that's not clear?"

And at ESh, "We asked the faculty: 'This is what we've got so far. What do you like? What do you not like?'"

The degree of clarity, controversy, and available time helped determine just how many iterations there were on any issue. At ESm:

> [T]he SIT brings back to the faculty an issue if it's unclear as to what the faculty wants and needs. We listen, we use charts, and we take it back to the SIT and hash it out. For example, inservice needs: we're always surveying staff about what topics and where they see themselves [in terms of familiarity and mastery of each topic].

At PGs:

> This morning, we had some budget decisions to make and the management team voted not to have the final decision made at the meeting this morning, but rather to have members go back out to the school and poll the entire staff. Then we will reconvene and make a final decision.

Again at PGs:

> We may have time to take [a decision] back to individual teams, for example, a decision on whether or not to continue with the music teacher...Before it was done, there was a whole lot of discussion in the smaller teams.

Despite all the variations in the structure and organization of planning and decisionmaking, three distinct patterns can be seen. One pattern can be seen in PGs and PGh, where the school improvement team's main partners in planning and decisionmaking were grade-level or subject matter teams and departments. Representatives from these teams or departments also accounted for the bulk of school improvement team membership. In general, there was no formal consultation with other committees. And, although the whole faculty was apprised of the plan (even having input as to implementation at PGs), decisionmaking lodged elsewhere. Specifically, decisionmaking on the goals and strategies of PGs' plan resided in the school improvement team. Departments and the team

at PGh split the decisionmaking authority. Departments made decisions about their goals and strategies, while the school improvement team made decisions about schoolwide goals and strategies.

A different pattern can be seen in ESm and ESh. In these schools, the school improvement teams set up topical subcommittees to provide input on goals and/or strategies for school improvement.[1] Membership on these subcommittees extended beyond those who already served on the school improvement team. Grade-level groups or subject matter departments as such played no role. As in PGs and PGh, these school improvement teams drafted the plan for the whole faculty to review and finalized it after taking account of their input. In ESm, however, the faculty's acceptance of the plan climaxed the decisionmaking process. The team merely "formalized" the decision afterwards.

Still another pattern is evident in the remaining schools, ESe, PGe, and PGm. A hybrid of the other two patterns, improvement teams in these schools used grade-level teams or subject matter departments as well as other committees to develop their improvement plans. Though these schools differed as to the various groups' responsibilities and the sequence of planning events, they were alike in that the whole faculty as such played no role in the planning process. Moreover, these schools' improvement teams explicitly or implicitly delegated much of the decisionmaking power to the other groups while reserving for themselves the jobs of collating, integrating, and/or implementing the plan.

The structure and organization of decisionmaking in six of the seven study schools also gave individual faculty not serving on the school improvement team opportunities to raise personal concerns. In addition to their input into grade-level or subject matter team decisions and recommendations, individual faculty (in ESm, ESh, PGe) could confide a concern or issue to a school improvement team member, who would then bring it to the team. Or, individual faculty (in ESh, PGs, and PGm) could voice their concerns in person at meetings of the school improvement team or its subcommittees. Further, faculty (in PGe, PGs, PGh) could raise personal concerns in meetings of their grade-level teams, subject-matter departments, or the whole faculty, and be assured that the substance would be referred to the school improvement team.

In summary, the structure and organization of SBIDM were embedded in a complex communications network within each school. There was in all schools a network linking the school improvement team to other groups and individuals, although the specifics of the network and its operation differed according to local context. The involvement of these other groups and individuals in improvement planning ranged from mere consultation to *de facto* decisionmaking. Which groups played which roles varied within and across the schools. However, as confusing as it may have been for outsiders to track the different teams, clusters, wings, committees, subcommittees, and other groups possibly coexisting in a single school, and the nature and timing of their respective contributions to SBIDM, participants seemed to find it both sensible and productive.

Principals' Role On the Team

SBIDM recasts the traditional role of the principal. In the crudest terms, SBIDM transfers to the school improvement team or its auxiliary groups some of the principal's former prerogatives in

management and decisionmaking yet also implies a new role for the principal on the team. The study asked the principal and selected members of each school improvement team in individual interviews if the principal had assumed "a clear and appropriate role" within the school improvement team.

Principals and other members of the school improvement team generally agreed that principals had found a clear and appropriate role in working with their teams. Their comments about principals' roles clustered around two issues in particular: whether or not the principal had adopted the formal role of convenor and/or facilitator of team meetings, and the degree to which principals acted as "leader" *versus* "member" within the team.

In four of the seven schools (ESm, PGe, PGs, and PGm), principals served as the sole or the chief facilitator of team meetings. However, the principals in two of these schools (Esm, and PGs) acted as facilitator at the request of their teams. Principals in the three remaining schools (ESe, ESh, and PGh) either had yielded the facilitator's role to someone else or took turns along with other team members as the roles rotated.

Whether principals convened and moderated meetings did not entirely correspond to whether they behaved like members on an equal footing with other members. The prevalent view, expressed in almost identical terms by at least one informant in each of six schools, was that the principal was "a team member, not team leader." Being a member and not a leader seemed to have to do with how principals presented and supported ideas, and how they treated their teammates as decisionmakers. Where principals were perceived to be members, team members said that "everyone has equal weight" (PGs) and "equal power" (ESe).

Principals in all the schools were expected to contribute ideas and special information on school system policy and budgeting, for example. But where they were regarded as teammates, they were expected not to dominate the discussion and not to manipulate decisions. One ESm team member said, "We're not being led to come up with the decision the administrator wants us to come up with." A PGh team member remarked:

> I like the role [our principal has] taken because I envision the principal as one who comes in and says, "Here is how it is going to be." [Our principal] allows the group to interact. If there is a decision or clarification, [our principal] enters in there.

Team members (including the principal) at one of the "member, not leader" schools noted that maintaining this behavior was something of a struggle for their principal. "Sometimes he forgets that he's giving background information, not making the decision," one observed. "He's still working on it," empathized another. "He knows what his role is. Sometimes he slips out of it. We all help him."

Some of these principals had also characterized themselves as team members and not leaders. They described various ways they fulfilled that role. "When I speak," one said, "it's not 'end of discussion.' I'm just voicing my opinion." Sometimes they argued strenuously for their ideas or took an opposing view just "to get [team members] to look at different sides." These principals reported sometimes holding -- or biting -- their tongues and allowing the team to go in directions they would not have chosen. One said, "I'm not bothered if my idea is vetoed." Another commented, "I've

brought new ideas in. Fortunately, staff is ready for new ideas about involving children...I haven't been shot down on an idea yet."

In PGm, where no one had characterized the principal as just another member of the team, the principal and another team member agreed that the principal was the central figure in running meetings and shaping decisionmaking. The principal reflected:

> [My role is] clear, but it may not be appropriate. I'm probably too controlling this year [in comparison with a prior administrator]...This year, they need to understand what my values are, what my agenda is, and what I believe about school improvement.

The team member commented, "We don't object to it now...There's a saying here in the county that the principal has 51 per cent of the say. We're still feeling our way to see how it will work out with [this] principal."

Collaboration Within Teams

State guidelines informed school improvement teams that they were to work collaboratively on SBIDM.[2] To obtain information about how teams operated, the study asked principals and other members of school improvement teams how they went about their deliberations and decisionmaking. Specifically, the study asked informants to identify one or more group process techniques they used, especially those found especially helpful. The study also asked informants if and how the team made decisions, and if team members supported decisions once they were made.

Group Process Techniques

A few group process techniques were in common use across the teams. Reaching consensus and working in small groups, including cooperative learning and segmenting a problem and distributing portions of the problem to subgroups, were mentioned in six schools. Round robin, a turn-taking technique, was mentioned in four schools.

The term "consensus" seemed to take on a range of meanings as team members in those six schools described how they worked. Consensus in some schools (e.g., ESh) meant no voting -- within the team and other groups when the team interacted with them. In other schools, consensus coexisted with voting. ESm and PGs reported occasional voting. At PGs, for example, a team member stated, "Some decisions are by consensus and some are just made." PGe appeared to use voting more consistently. According to a team member there, "Generally, most decisions are...voted on, discussed in a parliamentary way. There are motions, the whole bit." Another explained, however, that decisionmaking is "based on consensus, since the total school is represented, based on the fact that most [grade-level] teams are in agreement prior to our decision."

Team members' comments suggest that consensus has at least two definitions relative to SBIDM. Consensus denotes a method of reaching agreement on a particular issue within a single body, usually in contrast to voting. Consensus also refers more broadly to the inclusiveness and iterative nature of the decisionmaking process which consults and informs repeatedly and widely throughout a school.

Several teams also made particular mention of techniques which could be identified as having been introduced or stressed in intensive team training sessions by their respective regional centers. For example, all three schools on the Eastern Shore mentioned assigning members group process roles, such as facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper. Three of Prince George's County schools mentioned problem-solving for practical innovation (PSPI). Other techniques included using force-field analysis, establishing explicit norms for group behavior, going on a gallery walk, and creating a party-like atmosphere with fun and food to attract other staff's involvement in planning.[3]

Reaching Decisions As A Team

Team members across all schools affirmed that their school improvement teams talked and then they reached decisions. The talk was plentiful and important. At ESe: "Various people give input on should we do it or why it should not be done. Then we come to consensus on it." At ESm: "They ask a lot of questions, which I think is healthy."

In some schools, decisionmaking within the team followed a multi-step, iterative process much like the one the team used with other groups. Someone from PGh commented:

> There is a lot of talk. Issues are often sent to a smaller decisionmaking committee...to work out the nuts and bolts. It's a cycle, a continuously evolving modification cycle.

A PGm team member related:

> We bring general questions to the entire committee. Then a subgroup attacks the problem. Then we take it back to the committee. We do this several times until we come up with a product we feel is adequate.

Team members in several schools commented on their team's efficiency in decisionmaking. At ESh, team members acknowledged that they had only recently managed to translate their talk into decisions. "[At the regional center's training] we learned how to organize ourselves so we *could* come to decisions." Other teams had been at it longer. At PGs, for example, "We remain very focused, more so because of the lack of time, so we arrive at decisions in an expeditious manner." At ESm, a team member said, "Sometimes I'm amazed at the ease with which we make decisions because it's such a diverse group of teachers."

Those teams not claiming efficiency or smoothness pointed instead to the inclusive or democratic nature of their decisionmaking. Some team members noted that the structure and organization of decisionmaking, however cumbersome and time-consuming, produced agreement in the end. In PGe, a team member described how "sometimes decisions are made within the team or recommended from many teams. Then we make a final decision as the management team." "Is it easy?" asked the ESe principal. "I've heard folks say there are times they wish I would just make the decisions...[But] that's just not the way we work."

Yet, even efficiency and democracy may not always be sufficient to produce the number or quality of decisions that need to be made. From ESm came one person's assessment that "[w]e don't solve as many problems as we need to." At PGm, someone observed that "time...is another concern.

It's always disjointed, so we have to attack problems not in one or two sessions, but in three, four, or five. It doesn't lend itself to creative thinking."

Supporting Decisions

Principals and other team members interviewed almost unanimously agreed that team members supported decisions once they were made. The prevalent explanation was that team members went along with decisions, even if they had raised questions or preferred a different outcome, because of the way the decision had been arrived at.

"It does not mean that you have to agree with everything," an ESe team member elaborated. "But you support the decision that was made because of the way we go about doing it." A PGs team member said:

> Decisions are based on the best interests of the school. We try to be sensitive or aware of everyone's personal feelings. By the time we've made it to the point of decision, it is generally how the team feels as a whole, so it is supported.

A team member from PGe suggested that real support from those who had wavered came only after they saw the decision implemented. "Normally, what happens is that you may vote on it, but later, as you see it implemented, that's when you got sold on the idea."

The next most common explanation was that team members supported decisions in consequence of their acting as ambassadors or liaisons in reporting back to their constituent groups. It was not necessarily their job in all schools to sell the decision. At PGe, "They take decisions back to [grade-level] teams and tell how the decisions were derived and share minutes and, if they come up with some kinds of concerns, they bring it back to us."

At ESh, team members explained their support for decisions in terms of team norms or explicit checking for support within the decisionmaking process:

> We made it a very important thing when we started. We've got to show support because that's how we'll get the faculty to support what we do...We talk and someone asks, "Think we agree?" and we do.

Added another member, "We all understand why we're there and have bought into it. We did team building...The SIT committee asked, 'Can everybody live with this?' and they do."

Improvement Plans

According to state guidelines, school improvement teams are responsible for producing annual improvement plans which address less than satisfactory performance on state indicators. Improvement plans may also address other goals and use other performance data at the direction of local school systems or individual schools' discretion.[4] Interested in the extent to which outcomes and data informed schools' improvement planning, the study asked principals, selected other school improvement team members, and faculty not on the team about their improvement plans.[5] Team members were also asked for their perception of the value of their plans in guiding school improvement.

Goals And Data

Informants' discussion of the goals in their plans and the data that informed those goals reflected state priorities.[6] According to their accounts, attendance and achievement goals figured prominently in all their plans. Moreover, the state's indicators for attendance and achievement had clearly entered into their planning.[7]

One aspect of the state's school performance program less evident in informants' comments was the disaggregation of performance data by race and sex. Individuals in only three schools, ESm, ESh, and PGe, made clear references to examining disaggregated data in the planning process. (In PGe, data were disaggregated by socioeconomic status and special education, in addition to race and sex.)

However, all the schools referred to goals and/or data sources beyond those specified in the state's school performance program. Additional goal areas in one or more schools included:

- discipline
- climate
- student attitude
- multicultural education
- the infusion of thinking
- interdisciplinary curriculum
- parent involvement.

Additional data sources included:

- grade distributions
- honor roll statistics
- student writing samples
- suspension rates
- reading levels
- reading textbook test scores
- number of books read
- climate surveys of staff, parents, and students
- PSAT and SAT scores
- parents' attendance at conferences and meetings
- budgetary information.

Informants in all seven study schools described producing a plan within the expected one-year cycle. Individuals in two schools, however, volunteered that their plans had longer time horizons. "We have a three-year outlook as to our plan," a PGs team member indicated. "Maybe because we're a special center, our goals for kids carry over more than one year." At ESm, the "plan basically covers a five-year period." It is unclear, however, how these schools' planning activities or plans may have differed from others'.

Plans As Guides To School Improvement

Principals, selected other team members, and other faculty were asked if their plans were a helpful guide to improvement. The answer in the seven study schools was a strong yes.

The word most commonly used in discussing the plan was "focus." Focus was used in a general sense to describe how plans signaled what was important and defined a direction for improvement efforts. As a PGh team member said, "The plan is a guiding force. It does give a focus" (PGh). Echoed a PGe team member, "It gives direction and focus" (PGe). Focus also referred to specific factors to which the plans called special attention. These included "a focus on student outcomes" (PGe), "the focus as to where we are in September and where we want to be in June" (PGm), and what the principal wants teachers to be focusing on in the classroom (PGs).

The plans represented a kind of public knowledge which expanded individuals' private knowledge. "It really lets us look at data," affirmed a PGe team member. "[B]efore SBIDM, it was maybe just the administrators who were aware. Now everybody takes part. It really wakes up their eyes." The public knowledge embodied in the plans helped staff see the school as a whole. An ESm faculty member not on the team said, "We work together and not just worry about our own curriculum area." This broader, schoolwide view could also deepen understanding and improve practice in teachers' own curricular areas. As a PGs faculty member said:

> I'm a new teacher. I find it very helpful to have some kind of guidance as to the things other people are working on. I know I can go and see things they are working on in other classrooms and then use similar ideas in my classroom.

Moreover, the problems and strategies enumerated in school improvement plans gave individuals a common language. This common language promoted communication among staff members and helped forge a consensus on needs. As a PGe team member said, "Now everybody...is talking about [the data and the needs they show]." "[W]hen you sit down as a group, because you have certain figures, certain data before you, then you're able to see strengths and weaknesses," stated a non-team member at PGh, where an elaborate needs analysis was conducted annually.

The plans also clarified for staff the school's mission. For example, an ESe team member described the plan as saying that "we want to get the most out of students and they can give it to us." When plans made explicit the logical connections between mission and strategies, the vision for improvement became more coherent and compelling. The PGs principal said:

> Especially because we're a special center, we have a lot of special needs. To see them outlined, to have strategies, how we will implement our goals, how we'll check up on it, adds a lot of clarity to the mission of our school, and support.

Added a team member, "[The plan] brings out a lot we automatically do but it brings out the reason why we do it. We can see how it goes into making us a better school."

In addition to providing focus and clarity, the plans turned hopes and words into deeds. "I look to the school improvement plan to spark and nurture much-needed changes," asserted a PGh team

member. An ESm faculty member not on the team said, "If we find problems, we don't push it aside and say, 'We'll deal with that next year or next term.' We'll solve that problem right now." "We're pulled by so many factors and so many needs," added a colleague, "that unless you have a high priority plan and pursue it, you get lost in your good intentions." At PGe, a non-team member acknowledged, "If we didn't have the plan, we probably wouldn't be doing a lot."

The plans also helped to unify and magnify school improvement efforts, drawing in faculty who were not on the team. "[I]t keeps you focused as an entire school," ESm faculty not on the team said. "It makes it more uniform, instead of everybody kind of doing their own thing," added non-team members at ESe. "I think it helps the continuity [for students]," a non-team member at PGs related. "For example, the staff [for younger children] is working on the same thing, and as those kids move up...you stay within the goal." A non-team member at ESh explained:

> We're getting [more people,] other people, other groups in the school saying, "OK, kids, if this doesn't work, then we've got this plan [to reduce dropouts]. If that doesn't work, we've got that plan. Why don't we try it?"

While uniformly aware of the plans and able to appreciate their value, faculty at large in some schools tended to see them as more informational than prescriptive. "It's a good foundation," an ESe faculty member said. "It gets everybody on the same starting point, and then to keep working...[on a] problem." A colleague added, "Individually, we're still allowed to make decisions we need to make. But we have a very good stepping stone to go from." According to team members at PGh, some faculty at large barely acknowledged the plan at all: "Some teachers never check it until the next year." For this minority of the faculty, plans over the years were "paper, as opposed to living documents."

While seen as clarifying and galvanizing for a majority staff, the plans were also seen to be in some sense provisional. "It's helpful," stated an ESm team member, "but we realize [the plan] has constantly to be looked at and revised. It's not a finished document forever." "It's a framework," a PGh team member said. "It's not carved in stone because we modify the plan as different needs emerge." And finally, from ESe, "It's functional. It's a working plan. It keeps making you think of what you could add."

In summary, team members and faculty at large agreed that their plans were helpful guides to improvement at their schools. The plans focused and directed energy toward improvement; they highlighted schoolwide needs and problems and gave staff a common language for talking about them; they clarified the mission of schools; and they channeled improvement activities toward common goals. On the whole, these informants understood their plans to be living documents, subject to modification, but concrete, practical, and useful for school improvement.

Endnotes

[1] This structure had been recommended at training sessions sponsored by the regional center both teams had attended.

[2] Helping teams develop skills for working collaboratively has been a consistent focus of the regional centers' intensive team development. Of the seven teams studied, portions of at least six (ESe, ESm, ESh, PGe, PGs, and PGh) had undergone intensive team development.

[3]Force-field analysis is a method for enumerating and weighting the factors in support of and in opposition to an endeavor. A gallery walk is a way of sharing the work of subgroups by posting their work in a room and inviting members of the whole group to walk around and see it.

[4]School systems typically tell schools the type of information plans should include and often provide a preprinted format for their use. School systems' SBIDM guidelines are discussed in a separate section of this report.

[5]This discussion drew on comments in individual interviews about how plans were developed, if the team used data in developing plans, and whether teams implemented and monitored their plan. In addition, it included information from focus groups of faculty not on the team who were asked to describe the plan if they were familiar with it. The study did not carry out a projected content analysis of data in school plans because improvement plan format did not universally include or require schools to insert evidence of needs.

[6]The state instituted SBIDM as one segment of an outcomes-based, data-driven system for school improvement planning. The ultimate goal was satisfactory school performance on statewide "data-based areas." These indicators and standards for satisfactory performance vary by school level, but include student attendance at all schools and achievement on statewide tests for all except special schools. Other indicators for which standards have been established include promotion rates for elementary schools and dropout rates for high schools.

[7]The special center's principal pointed out that attendance was the only state data-based area which applied to that school. This principal hoped additional indicators pertinent to that school's performance would one day be in use.

Local School Systems' SBIDM Guidelines and Plan Reviews

2

SBIDM in Maryland was not the sole province of schools: school systems also had a say. How big a say, MSDE left to school systems and schools to work out. This study sought to ascertain the school system context for SBIDM and to assess the quality of school improvement plans from the perspective of reviewers in school systems' central offices.

To discover the context, the study inquired into school systems' guidelines for SBIDM and procedures for plan reviews. Informants for this portion of the study were principals from the study schools and selected assistant superintendents who also served on their centers' steering committees. Information about the quality of school improvement plans was sought from these assistant superintendents.

Local Guidelines for SBIDM

School systems regulated some aspects of how schools carried out SBIDM, although the extent of regulation varied across school systems. School system regulation usually specified minimums and left schools free to go beyond them. Almost all school systems had at least modest requirements for school improvement team composition, activities, and plans. The requirements clustered especially around priorities which had to be addressed in plans. There was also a fair number of recommendations about things schools were encouraged but not required to do.

School system regulation of various facets of SBIDM has changed over time. Some school systems initiated SBIDM with a high degree of prescription, but had gradually loosened or abandoned some of their requirements. Others did the opposite, starting with few guidelines but gradually increasing their number and specificity, especially with regard to improvement plans.

Team Membership

In requiring or recommending some facet of the composition of school improvement teams, most school systems named the categories of persons to be tapped. Most often, these were teachers, parents, and students at the secondary level. Four school systems directed that teams were to include central office representation. Two school systems directed that teams include classified staff. One of these also indicated that teams should include a representative of the teachers' association. Another school system encouraged high schools to explore ways of obtaining "meaningful representation" from students.

Most assistant superintendents stated or implied that the exact composition and size of teams could and did vary within their school systems. Only one reported that the size of teams was fixed -- a minimum of 25 per cent of faculty, in this instance. Even there, however, principals could adapt

the guidelines to local conditions. Two assistant superintendents gave the example of very small schools as especially needing this flexibility.

Informants' accounts of central office representation on teams and observation on site did not align in all cases. For example, in a school system whose assistant superintendent had indicated that all teams had central office representation, none was listed on one team's roster and none was present at a team meeting. There are several possible explanations for this disparity. One is simply that the rules have changed and informants were not referring to the same time periods. Another may be that central office representatives were in these cases marginal to team functioning, attending irregularly and observing more than participating. Still another might be that school-based staff counted the central office presence as routine supervision instead of as team membership.

Scope and Nature of SBIDM

All assistant superintendents made note of one or more ways in which school systems controlled the scope and nature of SBIDM. Four indicated that their school systems had or were in the process of producing documents defining the scope of SBIDM. In general terms, these documents outlined types of decisions and the roles of various stakeholder groups in making them. One assistant superintendent described that school system's document as attempting to "establish rules, roles, and relationships...[for example, as to] who will determine final issues on staffing [and] on how dollars are used in our schools." This particular document was being developed with input from a representative group of parents, teachers, and administrators. Another assistant superintendent had asked principals to append to their plans "miniconstitutions" delineating the principal's and team's respective areas of decisionmaking.

The Prince George's County school system had produced various documents and provided workshops on SBIDM over its almost decade-long history with SBIDM. One recent publication, completed under the auspices of the regional center, incorporated the school system's vision of SBIDM into an existing instructional planning manual for teachers.

Three school systems indicated that they had guidelines relative to the minutes of improvement team meetings. Teams were required to submit their minutes to the central office in two instances, while in another they were encouraged to post or distribute them to faculty at large.

Development of Improvement Plans

The bulk of school systems' requirements and guidelines for SBIDM had to do specifically with school improvement plans. Most commonly, they contained directives on the format and the priorities addressed within the plans. Five of the school systems provided a format for plans. Some school systems insisted on use of the format, but others tolerated variations or even wholesale departures from it.

The formats in use typically provided space for teams to identify activities, those responsible for implementation, timeline, and how activities would be monitored or evaluated. In some cases, the plan format included space for data and goals. Among these, some school systems preprinted specific data and goals on the blank form teams were to use for their improvement plans.

All school systems expected plans to address the state and local priorities. State priorities for attendance, achievement, and other data-based areas were constant across the school systems, while local priorities varied. Local priorities in some school systems merely lifted up selected state priorities. One school system, for example, set as its immediate priority reaching state standards for satisfactory performance in elementary achievement and in secondary attendance.

Other school systems were equally precise about targets but chose local issues, such as elementary parents' attendance at parent-teacher conferences and secondary students' completion of Algebra I. Examples of plan goals in other school systems included equity, community involvement, staff development, student discipline, and multiculturalism.

School systems almost always made the inclusion of local priorities a requirement for school plans. Where the inclusion of local priorities fell short of being required, school systems "stressed" them, "encouraged" or "suggested strongly" that they somehow be "considered" in improvement plans. In some cases, local priorities carried over and in others, changed from year to year.

School systems also influenced which data school improvement teams examined in their planning. This influence was largely due to the fact that school systems processed and/or disseminated much of the data relating to state priorities. While schools themselves generated other pertinent data, school systems also exerted their influence over these. They either did this directly, by identifying local priorities, or indirectly, by stressing certain types of data and encouraging teams to review them. Examples of school-generated data in which one or more school systems communicated their interest included office referrals, suspension rates, student attitudes, and grade-point averages.

Supervision of Principals

Publishing guidelines for SBIDM, placing central office staff on teams, preprinting plan formats, and controlling the flow of data constituted only some of the ways in which school systems got their say in SBIDM. Another, if not the chief way in which school systems influenced SBIDM, however, was through the routine supervision of principals. A number of school systems had explicit expectations that principals' performance goals would be consistent with those in the improvement plan. "An automatic principal's goal is to turn in a [school improvement] plan that includes major initiatives of the school system and the state," an assistant superintendent said. "Mine were sent back fast," recounted one principal, "because I hadn't included enough on the system goals. Even our [school's] purchases are supposed to reflect system initiatives."

School systems also used principals and the supervisory process as a means to track and influence schools' progress throughout the year. In Prince George's County, assistant superintendents met with individual principals periodically within the planning cycle to review school performance data, goals, and implementation of plans. Other central office staff sometimes followed up and reported back to their assistant superintendents.

Several other school systems maintained close but relatively less formal contacts with principals with respect to SBIDM. For example, central office staff, who sat on teams and/or received the minutes of team meetings, communicated schools' progress on improvement planning to principals'

immediate supervisors. Their supervisors then followed up as needed.[1] These methods supplemented the administrative and supervisory staff meetings, memoranda, and other elements of school systems' supervision of principals and SBIDM.

Review of Improvement Plans

All school systems had procedures in place for reviewing school improvement plans. These procedures varied in complexity and formality. They ranged from the very simple -- for example, a single conference between a supervisor and principal -- to the more complex -- for example, a multi-stage rating process in which raters could go back to schools as often as necessary for more information before scoring plans and filing a written critique. The procedures also ranged from the relatively informal -- a principal and one or two central office staff discussing the plan -- to the relatively formal, where multiple readers systematically rated plans according to well-specified criteria. The procedures appeared to be in some flux, however, with some new practices slated in at least three school systems.

Review Schedule

School systems' schedules for reviewing plans also varied. One source of variation across school systems was the deadline for the submission of school improvement plans. Due dates spread over the calendar, from April to December, correlating to the budget cycle in some school systems. Another source of the variation could be attempts to mesh plan reviews with the schedule for principals' performance review. As noted above, plan reviews in Prince George's County fed into the performance review process as assistant superintendents met with principals for a review of their job targets in the fall, a midyear review in January, and an evaluation conference at the end of the school year.

To some extent, differences in the timing and pace of plan reviews also depended on the number of schools in a system and the complexity of the review process. In some places, some phases of the review could be negotiated between the school and central office:

> The first year...when plans were due, we said [to principals], "You and your team will come and present to the committee." The second year, we relaxed a little and said, "Tell us when you're ready."

Content

Assistant superintendents looked for different things as they reviewed school improvement plans. Some had limited their focus to a few general areas. For example, one assistant superintendent indicated that the review, which involved principals and other staff, was mainly concerned with school system initiatives and the use of data. Another assistant superintendent characterized the plan review as an opportunity to "hear [schools] talk about their plans. When we review new plans, in that context we ask, 'What did you accomplish? How did it go?' which reflects back on the old [improvement] plan."

Others scrutinized additional aspects of the plans. An assistant superintendent said:

> Usually I go out and talk to the principal one-on-one about what they're trying to achieve. I look for a couple of things. One is, are schools targeting the necessary areas? It's obvious that we have to make gains in MSPAP and CTBS. Are they targeting instruction and based on what information? I look at activities to see if they will help them get there...How do you measure progress on plans and what we actually do?

Finally, another assistant superintendent and staff applied a checklist developed at the regional center to improvement plans.

> The specialists and I look at what was chosen, why, which data support it, and see if there are other needs...If the plan met criteria and we feel the activities are appropriate, [then the plan] is complete.

Feedback

Not surprisingly, school systems also differed as to the amount and type of feedback on improvement plans that central offices gave to schools. Feedback was generally directed to principals. "We'd like to give direct feedback to each team, but because of the time commitment -- we have [many] schools -- there's physically no way I can do that," stated one assistant superintendent. Another indicated that the formality and frequency of feedback had relaxed along with some other school system rules about improvement plans. In this system, only the extremes of performance were noted in writing. It was "either 'you were outstanding' or 'look, this is the second year...' Otherwise it was mainly [oral] interaction."

Although principals and assistant superintendents generally concurred in their descriptions of the plan review process, they tended to disagree about the amount and timeliness of feedback. The feedback assistant superintendents described seemed to range from full discussions with one or more central office staff, to written communiqués, to no comment at all. Principals reported on the whole that they received relatively little feedback on their plans.

In the midrange of feedback on plans, principals reported receiving written reports or occasional letters. "Last year, [the plan] was referred to a committee...They sent back a paper after a long delay. We were very upset with [the central office]." Another principal said that "the only feedback we ever got is a letter from the [assistant] superintendent complimenting us on our plan. We've never had any suggestions for modification of our plan."

A perceived lack of feedback frustrated one principal. This principal, who had expressed uncertainty about what SBIDM was supposed to be, said:

> We had no feedback from the central office as to whether it was right or wrong, even now. The central office comment was: "It's your plan." The supervisor said that the superintendent wants numbers in the goals. As years went by, there was still nothing that says, "You're right."

Only seeing other schools' plans at a regional center training session and completing a plan with broad input from stakeholders finally helped assuage this principal's doubts.

A possible consequence of receiving feedback was that plans might have to be redone in whole or part. One principal described feedback from a meeting with a central office committee as constructive criticism which prepared her and the team to revise their plan if necessary. She noted, however, that the committee sometimes raised questions about activities a school was doing but had neglected to write up -- "like all the things the principal does" -- because the team thought them too cumbersome to include.

Quality of Improvement Plans

Assistant superintendents judged the overall quality of school improvement plans in their respective school systems to be adequate and getting better. Plan quality covered a range and that range fluctuated somewhat among school systems. In one case, an assistant superintendent placed the range from "one poor" to the rest "good": on average, "'good minus' but skewed toward the 'good' side." Another said plans ranged "from good to better. All can still reach 'best'...All are functional and usable." Still another put it as "a few outstanding, a few below the mark, but the bulk are getting better. About a B plus."

Depth appeared to be a critical dimension for assistant superintendents' judgments about the quality of plans. Depth referred both to the substantiveness of the issues addressed and to the thoroughness of the thinking in the plans. An assistant superintendent said, "Some are attacking only surface issues. Some go deeper, for example, to focus on black males in the third grade." Plans were "not so packed with unrelated stuff," averred another assistant superintendent. In the words of still another:

> As we in the central office get more focused, the schools get more focused naturally. So we see school improvement plans moving away from activities toward a lot of substance. They're moving to major strategies for instruction. For example, it's not just tinkering with reading, but it's about the school improvement team saying students need more time on task, and then saying they need more instruction. That led them to look at other models and therefore to parallel block scheduling. It's a major change in substance. The plans are more thoughtful, changes are greater, and there is more depth to the plans.

Assistant superintendents also expressed the view that plans had improved and would continue to improve. "The schools have only been in this a couple of years," one Eastern Shore assistant superintendent said, "so we have to be pretty satisfied with what we've got." In Prince George's County, where schools have been at SBIDM longer, an assistant superintendent said, "It takes time for all principals to believe [the plan] is a living document." According to assistant superintendents, needs for improvement included using "real data" in plans, prioritizing, adjusting up or down the amount of "challenge" in plans, and measuring progress. Improvement was expected in these areas. As another assistant superintendent described the plans: "They're not as good as they're going to be in a few years. Are they where we would want them to be at this point in time? Yes."

Endnotes

[1]Assistant superintendents tended to be principals' immediate supervisors in larger school systems. Superintendents performed this function in the smaller school systems. Some assistant superintendents reported that they or others in supervisory roles sometimes met with teams as well as with principals.

Status of SBIDM Implementation 3

How far along were schools in implementing SBIDM? The principal and two to three other members of each of seven school improvement teams were asked during individual interviews to rate their schools as to the implementation of SBIDM. Specifically, they were asked: "Where is your school vis-a-vis the full implementation or realization of SBIDM -- far from there, on the way there, or there?" They were then asked to explain their answers.

This chapter continues the practice of labeling study schools by location and level. ESe, ESm, and ESh refer to Eastern Shore elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively. PGe, PGm, PGh, and PGs refer to elementary, middle, and high schools, and a special center in Prince George's County.

Table 5 summarizes the mean scores for each school in the study sample. Responses were assigned a score of 1 for "there," 2 for "on the way," and 3 for "far from there." The number of informants in each school is shown in parentheses.

Table 5
School Ratings as to Full Implementation of SBIDM
By Selected Members of School Improvement Teams

School	Self-Score
ES Middle (n=3)	1.00
PG Special (n=3)	1.00
PG Elementary (n=3)	1.33
PG Middle (n=3)	1.33
ES Elementary (n=3)	1.67
PG High (n=4)	1.75
ES High (n=3)	2.00

Scale:
1 = THERE
2 = ON THE WAY THERE
3 = FAR FROM THERE

Legend:
ES = Eastern Shore
PG = Prince George's County

According to the principals and other team members, all their schools were either "there" or "on the way" to full implementation of SBIDM. Team members' perceptions of their SBIDM status aligned closely within each school. Three schools' teams were unanimous in their ratings; at least two team members agreed in the other four. No individual rated his or her school as far from fully implementing SBIDM.

Team members' ratings placed their schools relatively evenly between the points "on the way" and "there." However, teams in both high schools rated themselves less far along than did elementary, middle, and special schools' teams.

Team members' explanations for their ratings are described below.

"There" as to Full Implementation of SBIDM

Teams in a Prince George's County special center and an Eastern Shore middle school unanimously rated themselves "there" in terms of fully implementing SBIDM. The special center's team members cited a variety of factors, including the commitment and cohesion of the staff, and evidence that their plan was being implemented. Among other things, staff members said:

> We try to do everything collaboratively. We try to keep the whole school in mind, not individuals. We're divided into teams, but we stick together (PGs).

> [E]nthusiasm is generated every time we meet. Things happen (PGs).

The principal stated:

> I can see evidence at the classroom and team level of involvement...The process forces you to take time to listen to everyone and to identify problems, so when you get to the stage of resource allocation, we are really dealing with something of utmost concern and importance to the school (PGs).

In the Eastern Shore middle school, one staff member explained his rating in terms of the school's independence from the central office on a curriculum project the school was piloting. Another staff member based her judgment on the belief that staff had a voice in decisionmaking. She noted that the school was "a lot closer [to full implementation of SBIDM] than other schools in the county because the principal hasn't felt threatened to give up...decisionmaking power."

Nonetheless, both schools pointed out ways in which things could be better. For example:

> The only area we're still working hard to get at is parent involvement. We may not be able to change that (PGs).

> The problem is that we need school system support to be "there," but we don't get it...I [as principal] show the [team] my objectives. When the superintendent says, "Your objectives are fine, but *these* are the objectives I want you do to," it's frustrating (ESm).

These teams' conclusion seemed to be that what they were doing and experiencing was pretty much what SBIDM was supposed to be. As the special center's principal put it, "There's always room for improvement in the process as we learn, but for our school it's working very well."

"On the Way" to Full Implementation of SBIDM

The five remaining schools' team members rated themselves as somewhere along the way toward full implementation of SBIDM. Team members in both elementary schools and PG middle offered a

variety of explanations for their ratings. Selected comments from team members in these schools who rated their schools as "there" include:

> It's encouraged with teachers here to buy into SBIDM: to be reasonable and flexible about decisionmaking, so that we're doing what's best for students (ESe).
>
> [I had] an opportunity to compare two schools: one was in its infancy. This school is in a more mature stage (PGe).
>
> We are right on track in terms of what the school system is asking us to do (PGm).

Comments from those who rated their schools "on the way" in these elementary and middle schools include:

> [Implementing SBIDM] was like putting together a puzzle. You're not going to know what it looks like until it's all put together (ESe).
>
> My sense is that we've stepped back a bit in decisionmaking...If the current principal has an idea, [the principal] says it out front. Staff don't think it's their idea (PGe).
>
> Our two areas of need: one is training in group process and problem-solving; the other is finding a balance between my role [as principal] and their role in running the school (PGm).

The high schools' relatively lower ratings reflect the combination of real progress and real needs as to implementation of SBIDM:

> Yes, the structure is there; the process is there. Where we're [still] on our way is with follow-up -- when the decision is made and not everyone agrees with it (PGh).
>
> We definitely have faculty involvement and parent involvement, but it's those [same] parents you always have (ESh).
>
> I'm not sure of the path to get us all the way there because of funding, the practice of giving funds and then...taking away funds (PGh).
>
> We're halfway. We need more training. Lots of [schools] may be less started than we are. We want the rest of our people to go [to training] and we want ideas (ESh).

Strengths of SBIDM 4

Members of school improvement teams in the seven study schools participated in a storyboarding activity to describe what they perceived to be the strengths of SBIDM.[1] The activity involved approximately 120 team members who were asked to identify the "strengths, benefits, personal or institutional satisfactions, insights, thrills, and good things about the concept or practice of SBIDM." Collectively, team members generated over 400 responses.[2]

These responses are summarized on Table 6. Team members consistently identified nine areas of strength. The nine relate to issues of school improvement (improvements in ideas, decisions, implementation, and results, the focus on goals, and understanding of policies and programs) and stakeholder involvement (improvements in commitment, relationships, and self-efficacy).

Table 6
School Improvement Team Members' Perceptions of SBIDM Strengths by School and Frequency of Response

Strengths of SBIDM	Schools		Comments	
	N=7	Per cent	N=411	Per cent
School Improvement				
Improves ideas	7	100.0	73	17.8
Focuses on goals and needs	7	100.0	56	13.6
Improves decisions	7	100.0	50	12.2
Improves implementation	7	100.0	34	8.3
Improves results	6	100.0	17	4.1
Improves understanding of policies and programs	5	71.4	6	1.5
Stakeholder Involvement				
Improves commitment	7	100.0	81	19.7
Enhances self-efficacy	7	100.0	56	13.6
Improves relationships	7	100.0	38	9.2

School improvement and stakeholder involvement clearly interact. For example, a focus on goals, the generation and sharing of ideas, more systematic decisionmaking, and improved results influence stakeholders' feelings of participation and ownership. Conversely, feeling part of a team

(commitment), knowing colleagues better, and working with parents and community (relationships) all influence school improvement. However, the nine represent distinct areas of perceived strength.

Team members' comments about perceived SBIDM strengths are discussed more fully below. Sample comments are included and are identified by school. Schools on the Eastern Shore are referred to as ESe, ESm, and ESh, for the elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively. PGe, PGm, PGh, and PGs refer to an elementary, middle, and high school, and a special education center located in four different administrative areas within Prince George's County.

School Improvement

Close to 60 per cent of the strengths of SBIDM identified by team members relate to the substance and process of school improvement.

Improves Ideas

Foremost among the strengths was the perception that SBIDM improves the ideas available to the school and to individual staff members. One way that all teams expressed this was to indicate that SBIDM draws together varying perspectives from around the school. Sample comments include:

> Wide base of input helps generate more creative ideas (ESe).
>
> Getting ideas, perspectives from various fields (ESm).
>
> Group of people with different viewpoints working together to solve problems such as dropouts (ESh).
>
> Puts on the table different angles on problems and challenges (PGe).
>
> To bring together faculty as a whole to share ideas (PGs).
>
> Through the composition of the team, all faculty/staff have input (PGm).
>
> More can be accomplished from a larger, diverse group (PGh).

The creativity that team members discovered in each other's ideas and in each other was another component of this strength. Sample comments include:

> Share ideas, able to bounce ideas off other people, more feedback, new ideas coming from your ideas (ESe).
>
> Variety of ideas (ESh).
>
> Learning from the strengths of others (colleagues as models) (PGh).
>
> Permits one to see strengths of peers (PGe).
>
> Knowing there are true professionals in education: SIT committee (ESh).
>
> SBIDM allows our school to make use of the expertise of staff members which is varied and often untapped (ESm).
>
> Learned about the sheer variety and amazing creativity of ideas others have (ESe).

A corollary to discovering the creativity of ideas and of colleagues through SBIDM was the personal and professional development for team members. They welcomed the opportunity to obtain ideas and use skills in SBIDM. Sample comments include:

> Learning new roles as a team member (ESm).
>
> Get many ideas from staff/committee members (ESh).
>
> Learning new ways of doing things (the [regional centers] workshops) (ESh).
>
> Provide and receive ideas on strategies for instruction (PGm).
>
> Personal growth in confronting differences (PGh).

Focuses on Goals and Needs

Teams in all schools regarded SBIDM's goals orientation and needs-driven planning as a strength. The particular emphasis varied. Some stressed the value of focusing on student needs, while others stressed the value of accounting for local needs and conditions. Sample comments include:

> Being aware of tests results shows areas of strengths and weakness (ESe).
>
> We can deal with problems or situations unique to our school (ESh).
>
> Students' best interests are kept as focus (PGe).
>
> Children first (PGe).
>
> Looking at what works, what doesn't work, and making everything the best it can be (PGm).
>
> *Continuity*: helps problems to be addressed continually, not a different priority each year (PGs).
>
> All of us are working as a team to a common goal: student progress (PGe)

Especially in Prince George's County, teams also pointed to localized budgeting as a strength of SBIDM. Sample comments include:

> Budget: prioritized our needs within house (ESm).
>
> Insures that dollars are directed to solve school problems (PGs).
>
> Being able to assign funds within the school has focused spending responsibility and eliminated waste and excess (PGh).

Improves Decisions

Teams in all schools commented on improvements in decisions and decisionmaking as a strength of SBIDM. Teams indicated that decisions were better because they were school-specific and incorporated new ideas. Sample comments include:

Decisions specifically appropriate to our level and needs (ESm).

Let's try it and see what happens: new attitude, new ideas (ESh).

SBM plan is personalized to meet our special needs (PGs).

The ability to make sound decisions about instruction as they pertain *to our particular population* (PGm).

New ideas to improve students' academics (PGm).

Another aspect of this perceived strength was that decisions were stronger because they were made by knowledgeable people -- those closest to the school and students.

Nobody understands your school like you do; you're there every day (ESm).

Can the king show the jester how to perform? By allowing the specialists to make the decisions, you get better results (ESm).

As a teacher, I know the students I teach better than the central office and feel better qualified to decide what and how instruction is given (ESe).

Teams also valued the systematization of the decisionmaking process in general and specific benefits that could be realized through it. Sample comments include:

Norms set guidelines and boundaries for meetings to make them run smoothly (ESm).

Having the opportunity to discuss all sides of an issue before a decision is made (ESh).

SBM makes it easy to make decisions (PGs).

Problems can be referred to the appropriate level more easily (PGm).

Spotlight problems quickly (PGh).

Improves Implementation

Teams in all schools, but especially on the Eastern Shore, cited as a strength the fact that plans were being implemented and changes in instruction were occurring. Sample comments include:

The idea that started out as a seedling has worked its way through the process to become a reality (PGm).

Feeling of pride when an idea is agreed upon and implemented (PGe).

Try out new and different ideas and techniques in teaching (ESh).

Spelling program is greatly improved (ESe).

Teams also articulated the idea that sharing responsibility in decisionmaking makes for better implementation. Sample comments include:

Share in responsibility, shared responsibility (ESe).

Work areas are divided: one person doesn't have all the work (ESh).

Supports the role of principal [who gets] help in decisionmaking (PGm).

Sharing the burdens of planning and providing a quality educational program (PGh).

Improves Results

Six teams discussed improvements in results as a strength of SBIDM. Team members indicated either that the plan was working or that there were specific changes in student outcomes. Selected comments include:

Goals are met (PGh).

Students reap benefits (PGh).

It's a joy seeing the growth of the school as we work together (PGm).

Can *see* the results of your effort in the classroom (PGs).

Solved problems (ESm).

Varying instructional techniques -> successes (ESm).

Special READ program: seeing growth one-on-one (ESe).

Improves Understanding of Policies and Programs

Teams in five schools mentioned greater clarity on policies and programs as a strength of SBIDM. Selected comments include:

Helps us understand why things are done the way they are (ESe).

Less confusion about policies and procedures (ESm).

A better understanding of requirements (PGe).

Stakeholder Involvement

Over 40 per cent of all strengths identified by members of school improvement teams relate to issues of stakeholder involvement in SBIDM and the life of the school.

Improves Commitment

All seven teams named as a strength of SBIDM increases in unity of purpose and collaboration in their schools. The idea of teamwork and cohesion came through clearly. Selected comments include:

Attack problems as a group (ESe).

Solidarity among team members (ESe).

Team approach: there is no 'I' in team (ESm).

Not afraid to fail as individual team member and as a team (ESm).

Not isolated (PGe).

I feel I am a part of the decisionmaking process, making me a part of how our school functions (PGs).

The SBM team unifies the school (PGm).

The strength provided in a bundle (PGh).

Teams were equally clear that a strength of SBIDM was ownership and "buy-in" from other staff. Selected comments include:

Staff ownership of problems and successes (PGh).

Buy-in, because it's ours (PGh).

Builds commitment to decisions (PGm).

Process filters and distills grievances (PGe).

Joint decisions are easier to swallow (ESh).

Greater buy-in: buy-in helps insure success (ESe).

Enhances Self-Efficacy

All seven teams expressed the idea that SBIDM had enhanced their own and others' sense of being important to the school. One well-developed theme was that one's ideas were given a hearing in a risk-free environment. Selected comments include:

Ideas are listened to in a non-judgmental manner (ESe).

Treats staff as valuable, contributing professionals (ESm).

Chance to express your opinion (ESh).

Satisfying to know your opinion counts, thrilling if others accept your ideas (PGe).

My ideas matter (PGe).

You are not made to feel unimportant and all ideas or concerns are heard and addressed (PGs).

Knowing that all ideas are equally important (PGm).

Able to share concerns with no pressure, worry about retribution (PGe).

Participation equalizes the years of teaching, experiences, etc.: everyone is valued and appreciated (ESe).

Teams also described feeling empowered because they had input into decisionmaking. For some, the feeling of empowerment translated into renewal. Selected comments include:

Possibility that I can have a more immediate impact on [the school] (PGh).

Knowing that what we do will impact our school's future goals (PGm).

Active participation takes away feelings of being powerless I had felt in non-SBIDM schools (PGs).

Chance to have input into all school-based decisions (ESm).

Glad to come to work (ESm).

It revives us: many of us have been around a while and this group is refreshing (ESh).

Improves Relationships

Teams in all seven schools also indicated that a strength of SBIDM was improvement in relationships and communication. Most referred to improved relationships with other staff, and some referred to parents and community. A few mentioned better relationships with students and with the administration as a strength of SBIDM. Selected comments include:

Get to work with a variety of individuals [on] staff (ESe).

Parents, community invited to attend, be involved; allows their input [and] avoids blame: "It's 'their' fault!!" (ESm).

To connect teacher/parent ideas into decisionmaking process (PGs).

We laugh and cry together (PGm).

All communication improves (PGm).

Fellowship with staff members I rarely see routinely (PGh).

Easier for community to take an active role in school planning (PGh)

Good cross-communication between all parties: departments, kids, administration (PGh).

Endnotes

[1]The activity was conducted separately for each team. Specifically, the activity used in the study was an adaptation of storyboarding, a group process technique also known as compression planning. Team members first wrote individual responses on blank cards, one thought per card. They then read their cards to the group in round robin fashion. In some instances, members were asked to edit their cards slightly for clarification. Cards which members determined to contain similar ideas to those read aloud were collected until all cards had been collected. The cards were then tentatively grouped on a display board and discussed briefly. The study team later typed all the responses from each team on a list. A copy of each team's list was sent back to the school for the team's use.

[2]A total of 413 response cards was generated across the teams. Of these, 407 were codable and resulted in 411 comments. Individual teams gave from 48 to 84 responses each. The mean number of responses per team was 59. The median was 56 and the mode was 48.

Needed Improvements in SBIDM 5

The same 120 members of seven school improvement teams who identified strengths of SBIDM were also asked to identify "upgrades, needed improvements, adjustments, modifications, and things to make better the concept or the practice of SBIDM." Collectively, they generated over 200 responses on perceived needs for improvement in SBIDM.[1] These comments on needed improvements came to about half the number of their comments on perceived SBIDM strengths. In other words, teams had twice as many praises as complaints for SBIDM.

Table 7 summarizes team members' perceptions as to needed improvements in SBIDM. Although 11 areas for improvement emerged, they fall into two general categories. One has to do with school improvement: the resources, policies, procedures, and materials of SBIDM. The other has to do with increasing stakeholder involvement, especially the commitment of other staff.

Only seven of the areas for needed improvement (needs for more time, more money and staff, changes in school system and state policies, more training, changes in SBIDM procedures, more active staff involvement, and more parent and community involvement) were mentioned in five or more teams. This contrasts with teams' generation of strengths, in which all areas of strength were mentioned in five or more teams. An additional three perceived needs for improvement were mentioned in half or more of the teams.

Team members' comments or perceived needs for improvement in SBIDM are elaborated below. As in preceding chapters, comments are attributed to ESe, ESm, and ESh for Eastern Shore elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively. PGe, PGm, PGh, and PGs, refer to Prince George's elementary, middle, and high schools, and special education center, respectively.

School Improvement

Over two-thirds of team members' comments related to needed improvements in the resources, policies, procedures, and materials for SBIDM. The greatest perceived need was for more time, followed by the need for more money and for changes in school system (and state) policies *vis-à-vis* SBIDM. Each accounted for between 16 and 20 per cent of the responses. The next greatest perceived need for improvement, for more training, only accounted for six per cent of the responses, although teams in all seven schools mentioned it. Two other needs for improvement, for changes in SBIDM procedures within schools and for more ideas or specific strategies to implement, each accounted for about five per cent of the responses. Finally, the need for more or better data was raised in only two teams, for a total of one per cent of the responses.

More Time

Time for team planning was an issue in all seven teams. Team members identified the need for more team planning time or time to communicate with those not on the team, as well as the need to

schedule team planning time differently. As to scheduling, some expressed the need to avoid interrupting instructional time, while others wanted to avoid non-school time for meetings. Still others mentioned the need for more time to implement improvement strategies. Selected comments include:

> Need more time to work on plan (ESh).
>
> Need more time to meet and include others (ESm).
>
> More staff development time (PGe).
>
> Need more time: ha, ha (ESm).
>
> More quality time for planning (PGs).
>
> More time to accomplish each goal effectively (PGs).
>
> Time to give to serious problems (PGh).

Table 7
School Improvement Team Members' Perceptions of Needed Improvements in SBIDM by School and Frequency of Response

Strengths of SBIDM	Schools		Comments	
	N=7	Per cent	N=223	Per cent
School Improvement				
More time	7	100.0	43	19.3
More money and staff	6	85.7	36	16.1
Changes in local and state policies	7	100.0	35	15.7
More training	7	100.0	14	6.3
Changes in SBIDM procedures	5	71.4	12	5.4
More ideas	4	57.1	11	4.9
More data	2	28.6	3	1.3
Stakeholder Involvement				
More staff involvement	7	100.0	44	19.7
More parent and community involvement	6	85.7	12	5.4
More student involvement	4	57.1	9	4.0
Greater understanding of change	4	57.1	4	1.8

More Money and Staff

Six of seven teams discussed the need for more resources in the form of money, staff, or instructional materials. Particularly an issue among teams in Prince George's County, a number of comments about the need for more money carried a note of frustration. Selected comments include:

> Lack of materials to implement creative ideas (ESm).
>
> Never seems to be enough money (PGs).
>
> They want us to make these grand decisions and changes, but they don't provide enough resources (PGm).
>
> Extra staffing needed for new ideas (PGh).
>
> Money! (PGh).

Changes in Local and State Policies

Teams members in all seven schools expressed the need for more support for SBIDM from their school systems. The support they wanted tended to be couched in terms of school-level control over instruction as well as over budget. Holding to promised levels of resources was also mentioned. While some team members wanted their central office to be more accessible and more involved with them in SBIDM, others clearly did not. Another subject for central office change had to do with how schools should be evaluated. Team members directed only a handful of comments to the state. These largely concerned a perceived mismatch between state goals and local conditions.

> Central office should be encouraged to visit and observe "good things"! (ESe).
>
> Upper management needs to mean it when they say they're going to implement SBIDM (ESm).
>
> We need to feel we can try things that might go against board policy: the ability to go out on a limb and not be afraid the limb will break (ESh).
>
> Better feedback from board of education on specifics of our school improvement plans (ESh).
>
> Get county to commit to a budget when it is planned (PGh).
>
> Central office hands off (PGh).
>
> Central office more involved, accessible (PGe).
>
> We are all held accountable for the same thing, but "they" neglect to take all situations into consideration (PGm).

More Training

Team members on all seven teams noted the need for more training and/or training for more team members. Several made specific requests for the opportunity to visit other schools. Sample comments include:

Allow *all* team members to attend training (ESe).

Even in different county, ability to visit other schools that have success in some of our problem areas (ESm).

Increased opportunities for staff development regarding team process (PGs).

Problem-solving training for the entire team (PGm).

Changes in SBIDM Procedures

Five of the seven teams mentioned the need to refine some aspect of how they carried out SBIDM. Most commented on changes they would like to see in the procedures or mechanics of the SBIDM process at their schools. Examples include:

Quicker follow-up on good ideas (PGh).

Opportunity to meet in small groups to problem-solve (PGh).

Need more (other) people to rotate roles (ESm).

Focus on less ideas (PGe).

Others commented on ways that the principles of SBIDM could be reasserted or that neglected phases, especially evaluation, could be addressed. Examples include:

Continue to strengthen ability to think of "whole school" issues rather than team issues or personal issues (PGs).

Evaluation of our plan needs to improve (are we evaluating it?) (ESh).

More Ideas

Members of four teams identified the need for more ideas for what works or the need to implement specific changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and administration. Examples included:

Exposure to models of excellence: what works (PGm).

Better understanding of research on learning (PGh).

Need to revise report cards (ESe).

Look at tardy policy (ESh).

More major consequences for disruptive students (PGm).

More Data

Two comments pointed to needed improvements related to data. One concerned data management at the school site, and the other, the need for more complete data.

Stakeholder Involvement

Almost a third of team members' comments on needed improvements in the concept or practice of SBIDM related to stakeholder involvement. However, this category contained the most frequently cited need for improvement, mentioned in all seven schools: the need for more commitment to school improvement on the part of other staff. A small number of team members in six schools discussed the need for more parent and community involvement and, in four schools, for more student involvement. In addition, even fewer team members in four schools mentioned the need for stakeholders to embrace or understand change.

More Staff Involvement

Team members in all seven schools described the need for greater participation and commitment on the part of other staff. Better communication between the team and other staff was mentioned sometimes as a need and sometimes as an implicit solution. Some of the former indicated acute awareness of the problem but either a lack or exhaustion of ideas for overcoming it. Selected comments include:

> Improve ownership of non-SIT members: find ways to increase communication and cohesiveness with remaining staff (ESe).
>
> We invite, invite, invite, invite others to join, yet sometimes seems like same people do the work, make the responses, respond to problems or needs (ESm).
>
> What do we do to make some colleagues feel that they are included, that their ideas matter? (ESh).
>
> Want to be able to use specific staff with specific talents when needed (PGe).
>
> How can we expand the positive feelings/teaming to the *entire* staff? (PGs).
>
> Convince more faculty to become involved in process of helping to create change (PGm).
>
> Improved communication: how? (PGh).

More Parent and Community Involvement

Mentioned in six teams, the need for more parent and community involvement was usually described in general terms. In a few instances, it had specifically to do with membership on the school improvement team. Sample comments include:

> Need more parental involvement in all aspects of the school (PGm).
>
> Community business to support school with time and money (PGm).
>
> Ways to creatively involve parents in their children's schools (PGs).
>
> Additional parent representing a different attendance area (ESh).

> Get more parents involved; community members who do not have children in our schools do not want to pay taxes, have no interest in educational needs (ESe).

More Student Involvement

The need for more student involvement came up in four teams. It was most clearly an issue in high schools, but was also mentioned at an elementary and a middle school. The comments reveal a number of ideas for involving students. Sample comments include:

> Survey students on what's good and bad at [our] school; teachers have been surveyed (ESh).
>
> Break down the opposition to having student member(s) [on the team] (ESh).
>
> Involve student council (PGe).
>
> More student involvement on team (PGh).

Greater Understanding of Change

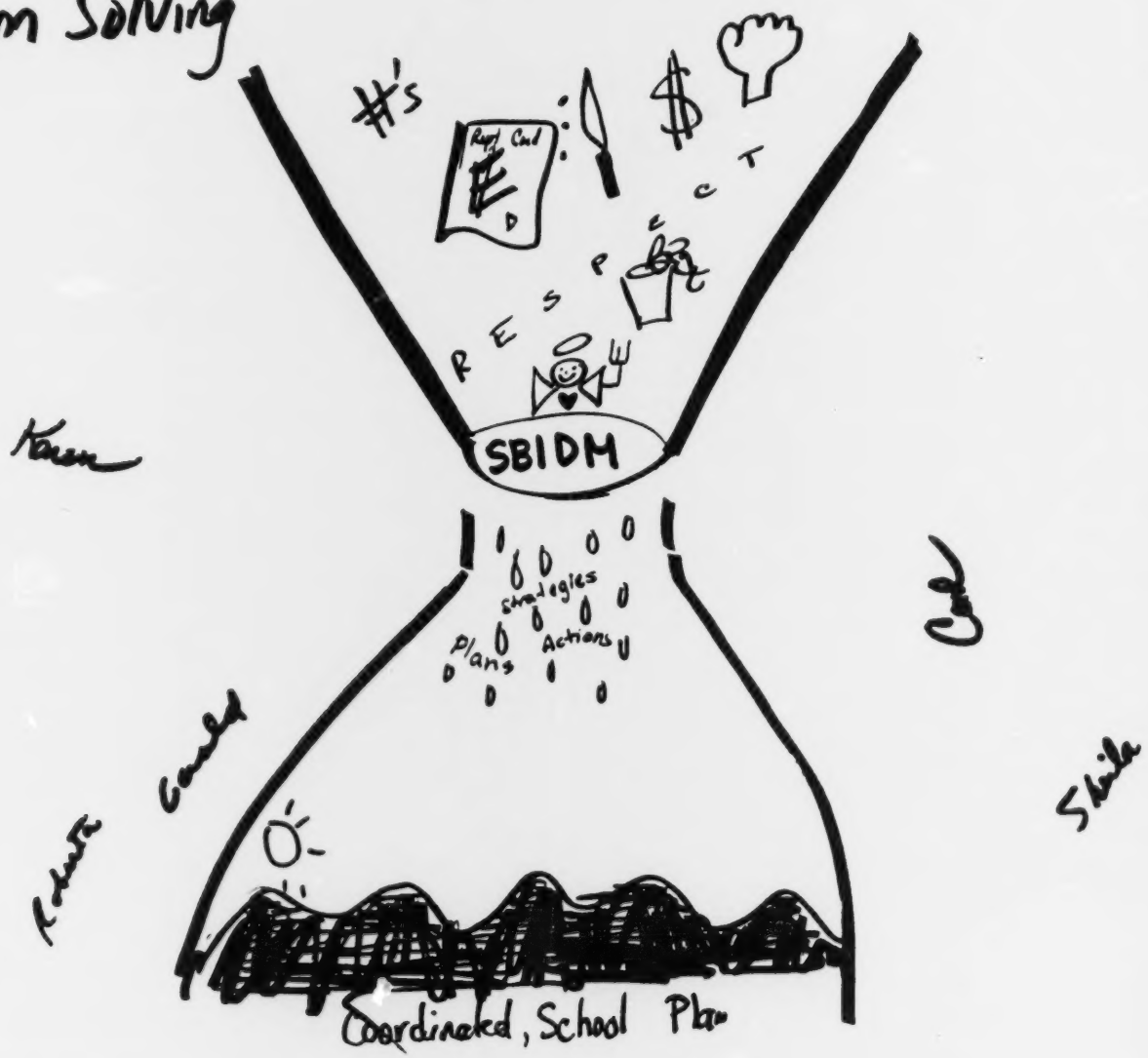
The need for others to understand or to embrace change emerged in four of the seven teams. Although the majority of these comments suggested others' resistance to change, in one case it was a matter of others' impatience that changes weren't coming fast enough. Comments include:

> Help convincing some people change is good (if needed) (ESm).
>
> Ability to *want* change; avoid the 'don't rock the boat' feeling (PGe).
>
> Frustration: faculty complain that certain things are not done better; need to encourage understanding of faculty that change is gradual (ESh).

Endnote

[1]A total of 219 response cards was generated across the seven teams. Of these, there were 213 codable cards which produced 223 comments in all. Individual teams generated between 24 and 58 response cards, for a mean of 31. The median number of cards was 29. The distribution was bimodal at 24 and 28.

Goals : Objs
School Inst. Plan
Problem Solving



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Part II: Perceptions of the Regional Centers

Strengths and Needed Improvements in the Regional Center in Baltimore City 6

This chapter presents the comments of Baltimore City's steering committee members as to the strengths and needed improvements in their regional center. These comments were generated in a storyboarding activity with approximately eight steering committee members. They produced a total of 62 comments pertaining to strengths and 32 comments pertaining to needed improvements.

> *At the time of the study, Baltimore City's regional center had offered training for parents citywide, as well as for principals and professional development cadres in every school. The center also developed the minigrant program and had awarded two rounds of minigrants. The center's activities are described more fully on page 2 in the Introduction.*

Strengths of Baltimore City Regional Center

Members of the Baltimore City (BC) steering committee were asked to identify "the strengths, benefits, personal or institutional satisfactions, insights, thrills, and good things" about their regional center for SBIDM. Table 8 summarizes the comments they generated.[1]

BC steering committee members overwhelmingly identified the training offerings and, to a lesser extent, training materials and the minigrants program as the center's greatest strength. The next two greatest strengths, cited with equal frequency, were the use of systematic, data-based planning and the achievement of results, especially steering committee members' own development of skills and insights.

Manifest improvements in shared decisionmaking and involvement, especially with respect to the inclusion of parents, emerged as the next greatest strength. Finally, BC steering committee members cited as a strength the actual implementation of SBIDM throughout the school system. This included an increase in communication and coordination, due mainly to the composition and activities of the steering committee itself.

Offers Needed Programs and Products

Almost half the comments identified the regional center's programs and products as a strength. Training for parents was mentioned most frequently. Training for teams and cadres were cited, as well. Sample comments include:

Table 8
Baltimore City Steering Committee Members' Perceptions of Regional Center Strengths

Strengths	Comments	
	N=62	Per cent
Offers needed programs and products: ● Training ● Materials ● Model staff development ● Minigrants	27 16 5 1 5	43.5
Focuses on outcomes and data	11	17.7
Improves results	11	17.7
Improves shared decisionmaking and involvement	8	12.9
Improves coordination	5	8.1

Provided mechanism for increasing growth experiences for parents.

Parent/community conferences (series).

Training in staff development techniques for SIT.

Professional Development Cadres: establishment of site-based cadre.

Principal training on shared decisionmaking and teaming for change.

Building the capacity of participants: awareness and skill development.

Steering committee members also saw strength in various materials the center had developed. Examples include:

Survey form is a valuable evaluation instrument for self-evaluation of SIT teams.

Development of cadre packets.

Development of training materials that are "reusable."

They also stressed the value of minigrants:

Benefits: SBIDM *grants*!

Minigrants provide opportunities for schools and school teams to formulate their own school decision linked to need.

In addition, one comment cited the center's approach of "narrowing the focus of staff development activities" as a strength.

Focuses on Outcomes and Data

Close to one-fifth of the comments commended the regional center's focus on outcomes and data. Most of the comments pointed to the utility of specific data, such as needs assessments and feedback from training. Selected comments include:

> A systemwide needs assessment was conducted and data utilized.
>
> Using data to drive next steps: feedback forms, etc.
>
> The requirement of an evaluation component.
>
> Provided data-driven models for developing and implementing school improvement plans.

Improves Results

An equal number of comments, just under one-fifth of the total, relate to the achievement of learning outcomes. The great majority of these referred to personal growth for the adults involved, especially steering committee members. Only one comment referred to school performance. Examples include:

> Opportunity to facilitate and present SIT trainings.
>
> Format of evaluation survey gave me ideas for designing continuum for other project.
>
> I have become skilled as an ambassador for SBIDM.
>
> Good things: children learn! Children's learning is the focus; already seeing the results.

Improves Shared Decisionmaking and Involvement

One-eighth of the comments described improvements in shared decisionmaking and involvement. Gains in involving parents meaningfully were particularly stressed. Comments include:

> Increased acceptance of parents as partners in education.
>
> Parents and community are included in planning, presentation, and evaluation.
>
> Provided lots of opportunities for staff to collaborate and grow.
>
> Sharing power at school base.

Improves Coordination

Finally, about one-twelfth of the comments described changes in school programs and in school-system coordination. Related to coordination was improved and expanded communication. These comments include:

> Forced system to clarify some questions about SITs.
>
> Use of Friday Group to share ideas and experiences.

Needed Improvements in the Baltimore City Regional Center

Members of the BC steering committee used the same storyboarding technique for generating comments about "needed improvements, upgrades, adjustments, modifications, and things to make better the regional centers or SBIDM." Their comments on needed improvements in the regional center amounted to just over half the number of comments they listed as strengths. Table 9 summarizes BC steering committee's perceived needs for improvement in their regional center.[2]

Table 9
Baltimore City Steering Committee Members' Perceptions of Needed Improvements in the Regional Center

Needed Improvements	Comments	
	N=32	Per cent
More programs and products:	11	34.3
• Training	9	
• Minigrants	0	
• Materials	2	
• Model staff development	0	
Changes in procedures or activities	9	28.1
More monitoring and evaluation	8	25.0
More communication involvement	2	6.3
Changes in local policies	2	6.3

The steering committee identified three major and two minor areas for improvement. The first major area of need was for more programs and products. The second major need was for various changes in the procedures and activities of the regional center. The last major area need was for more monitoring and evaluation.

The minor areas of need were marked by just two comments each. One identified the need for more communication and involvement. The other consisted of messages to local authorities about SBIDM.

More Programs and Products

Just over a third of BC steering committee comments were directed to needed modifications in the regional center's programs and products. Virtually all of these comments referred to training, especially in terms of who should receive training or the type of training to be offered. Those recommended for some training or more training included school improvement teams, paraprofessionals, and the steering committee itself. Suggestions about modifications or additions to training included helping teams prepare their minigrant proposals and providing technical assistance to teams. Sample comments include:

> Focus on schools that are having difficulty utilizing the SDM process.
>
> Increase opportunities to provide intensive training to SITs.
>
> Reemphasize responsibilities of those involved in SIT/cadre trainings.
>
> Capacity building has focused on awareness level and some skill development: need to continue growth.

Only two comments addressed the need to modify or add to the regional center's materials. These were suggestions to develop a team resource manual and to put the regional center's name on its products.

Changes in Procedures or Activities

Over a quarter of the comments on needed improvements recommended specific changes in assorted procedures, activities, or other aspects of management under the steering committee's or coordinator's control. These recommendations centered on strengthening the regional center's planning and administration in general (and of minigrants in particular), enlarging steering committee membership, and identifying promising programs and practices. Sample comments include:

> Reinvigorate the steering committee by enlisting new members.
>
> Refine the selection process for the minigrant program.
>
> Need to be more realistic about time needed to get project under way.
>
> Identify model SITs for schools to visit.

More Monitoring and Evaluation

Another quarter of the comments on needed improvements targeted monitoring and evaluation specifically. Perceived needs included following up on regional center's programs in order to inform planning, as well as reporting needs data back to schools. Selected comments include:

Follow-through on the SIT assessment survey: report findings to the schools.

Monitor development of SIT teams.

Use feedback and survey data more fully to formulate and focus future SBIDM plans.

Data to compare our process with other districts.

More Communication and Involvement

Noted in a small fraction of the comments was the need for improvements in communication and involvement. These were:

Have a clear focus in the beginning of the effort and communication about SIT development.

Need to involve others in the work of implementing and monitoring SBIDM activities.

Changes in Local Policies

An equally small number of comments on needed improvement were directed to the local school system. These were:

Convince all in the Baltimore City Schools that SBIDM is a large part of school improvement.

Have superintendent announce that SBIDM is not a FAD.

Endnotes

[3]Steering committee members in Baltimore City contributed 57 response cards. There were 56 codable response cards which accounted for 62 comments.

[4]Participants contributed a total of 28 response cards. There were 27 codable response cards which accounted for a total of 32 comments.

Strengths and Needed Improvements in the Regional Center on the Eastern Shore

7

This chapter presents findings on perceptions of strengths and needed improvements in the Eastern Shore regional center. Informants were assistant superintendents representing five of the Eastern Shore's nine small, mostly rural school systems. All five informants served on the Eastern Shore's regional center steering committee.[1]

In the course of individual interviews, these assistant superintendents were asked to identify the strengths or benefits, and the needed improvements or changes in the regional center. Their comments are summarized below. The number in the reference that follows each comment designates an individual Eastern Shore assistant superintendent.

> *At the time of the study, the Eastern Shore regional center had offered initial awareness training in SBIDM, Dimensions of Learning, and parent involvement for representative groups of administrators, teachers, and parents. The center had also initiated intensive team development and administrator seminars, in addition to continuing work on Dimensions. Local school systems designed supplementary activities with funding from the center. The center's activities are described more fully on pages 2 and 3 in the Introduction.*

Strengths of the Eastern Shore Regional Center

Assistant superintendents identified a number of specific strengths of the Eastern Shore regional center. These may be summarized as two major strengths: increases in schools' capacity to implement SBIDM and school improvement, and increases in school systems' capacity to support school improvement.

Increases Schools' Capacity for SBIDM and School Improvement

The assistant superintendents described how the regional center built schools' capacity for SBIDM and school improvement. The means for it were increasing staff awareness and knowledge, and increasing the actual incidence of SBIDM.

Increases awareness and knowledge. Assistant superintendents pointed to several types of evidence for the regional center's role in heightening general awareness and providing useful information to school staff all over the Shore. Selected comments include:

> [The regional center has] succeeded in creating an environment [and] has heightened awareness of the need for staff development and training (ES5).
>
> You have to work at it to bring people along and provide training. It's important to do on a regional basis so teachers know everybody's doing it. All over the Shore, everyone is working through it (ES3).
>
> [The intensive team development] did require our two teams to do further processing and to reflect further on the information they gained, and to reinforce it [by training other teams]. For other teams [whom they trained], it was a good readiness activity to prepare them for intensive training (ES3).

Increases the practice of SBIDM. The assistant superintendents indicated that the regional center's training and technical assistance also enhanced the skills of school people to do SBIDM. Selected comments include:

> [The regional center] did a lot of good things the first year, but the second year we moved away from just awareness and got into skills. This year we're going from awareness into follow-up. If we're ever going to make a difference, we have to do this -- moving from awareness to skill-building to follow-up -- and that's what's happening. I think it's excellent (ES5).
>
> The problem is that the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) exists. The state has thrown lots of resources for measuring but not at technical assistance for schools to deliver instruction. The regional centers provide technical assistance. We wouldn't have had it otherwise (ES1).
>
> It's growing. We say to schools, "Look at data." They say things like, "Eighty per cent of our kids are low-performing students. We want three resource teachers." It's not like everyone has *one* [resource teacher]! It's good, positive (ES3).

Minigrants helped school systems apply the training to their local situations. Some school systems used a portion of their minigrants to award competitive grants to schools.[2] Schools in turn found their ability to move forward on their own to be especially empowering.

> Where we can use some of the money for individual school grants, where they can do some of the things on their own, they can replicate what they've learned (ES5).
>
> As schools have ideas, they see that money is available and they can bring in experts from outside. They are learning that not everything has to come from the county or the state, and that schools can have an idea and that it's worthy (ES2).

Increases Local Capacity to Support School Improvement

Assistant superintendents also described how the ES regional center built capacity within school systems to support SBIDM and school improvement. Financial support was of paramount importance, but other contributions were significant as well. These other strengths included

identifying needs, increasing access to human resources, and providing support for school system leadership.

Enhances fiscal resources. Assistant superintendents cited the amount of staff development which the regional center's resources had brought into being as a chief strength. Selected comments include:

> I hate to think where we'd be without it, especially for a poor school system. We couldn't have done half of it (ES1).
>
> We don't have a large budget for staff development. There's not a staff development specialist on staff. We've done more staff development in the last two years [under the auspices of the regional center] than in the last five combined (ES3).
>
> [The regional center] has provided needed dollars for staff development training in the region which has difficulty getting money (ES5).

Assistant superintendents also reported that the regional center's fiscal resources enabled school systems to use local resources more flexibly. This created new sources of support for schools. For example:

> We actually use a combination of funds to provide for subs [when teams meet]. We never had any local funds available before. Now we mix funds from two or three pots to pay for subs (ES2).

Identifies needs. Assistant superintendents indicated that another strength of the ES regional center was its systematic and continuous identification of needs. Various benefits flowed from this identification of local and regional needs. One was that it provided a valid basis for planning the center's staff development offerings. Another was that it afforded a highly visible and successful model of a needs-driven approach to staff development planning.

> The regional center has been able to step in, look at what we're doing, and help define our staff development needs...[O]ver the last two years, it has grown stronger. It has become more focused and, because of that, our inservice is better (ES4).
>
> I'm very pleased with the process of working from needs to provide training for delivering instruction (ES1).

The minigrants program added another dimension by not only identifying, but also addressing school-specific needs. For example:

> [I]ndividual school grants...enable us to come back and address some of our specific needs...It gives us staff training we haven't been able to do on a county basis (ES5).

Where school-specific needs have been highlighted, it has had a galvanizing effect. Schools and school systems can join forces to locate resources once needs are known. For example:

> When we listened to minigrant applications, [a high school] wanted to do something big with total quality management that needed a lot of money, but we had only so much...We saw another way to use other funds and we also got Gaye Brown from MSDE to come. We had a super workshop and none of it funded this way. None of which would have happened if they hadn't proposed it for [regional center] support (ES2).

Increases access to human resources. Assistant superintendents laid special emphasis on the fact that the ES regional center gave local staff access to high-quality resource people. Beyond paying the necessary fees that would have been out of reach for individual school systems, the regional center brought in specialized expertise that was otherwise unavailable in any of the small school systems in the region. Moreover, siting the training on the Shore enabled larger numbers of staff to participate. Selected comments include:

> Because we're so small, we don't have in each school system the expertise in authentic assessment, for example. But collectively, we can have it or, by combining resources, we can get help (ES1).

> One of the greatest strengths of the regional centers was that we were able to bring in people like Debra Pickering and Jim Mitchell we couldn't have hoped to fund on our own. We were able to have her back [for follow-up] in our own school system. We sent representatives from each school just to meet someone like that, on the cutting edge. We could never have had the opportunity to do it without the regional center (ES2).

The informal teacher networks that developed as a result of regionalized staff development were also described as a strength.

Provides support for school system leadership. Assistant superintendents also indicated that the regional center supported them in their exercise of leadership for school improvement. The regional center's steering committee and coordinator were especially valued in this regard. Selected comments include:

> With a director who is able to go out, do some of the reading for us, and make contacts, these are things there is not time for small systems to do (ES4).

> [The steering committee members] are collegial and collaborative. If we divided up the $400,000 [the Eastern Shore's portion of the regional centers grant] and gave each school system $40,000, that wouldn't do it (ES1).

> On the Shore, the [steering] committee being assistant superintendents and MSPP leaders makes it sit at the level where decisions can be made...[It has been able to] provide a sharing forum for what we do locally...It has become a natural piece of the assistant superintendent's role (ES4).

Needed Improvements in the Eastern Shore Regional Center

The assistant superintendents who were interviewed voiced very few needs for improvement in the ES regional center. Most of their comments about needed improvements focused on various aspects of "more training." These can be summarized as more topics to be addressed in the training, more time for teams, more training for principals, and including others in training. The only two other comments had to do with enlarging the center's mandate and finding more centralized training sites. The thrust of all the comments, however, was for the regional center to continue providing staff development in support of SBIDM and school improvement.

More Topics

Assistant superintendents touched on the topics which could be included or emphasized in future training. One simply underscored the need to continue offering multiple options for training which matched the range of stated needs. Others proposed specific topical areas. These included an emphasis on integrative planning, staff development design, and evaluation. A sample comment follows:

> [T]he regional center could provide more training in working with adult learners, shaping a good staff development agenda, some of the techniques, little tips and tricks that all good staff developers have in their pockets (ES3).

More Time for Teams

One comment addressed the need for more sustained team planning time: "Obviously, one thing would be to give more money to bring teachers together for three or four days" (ES1).

More Training for Principals

Another comment spotlighted the need to focus more fully on training principals. Specifically: "I wish we had a more formal principal training process like the [Maryland Professional Development] Academy, especially the networking and in-depth training" (ES1).

More Audiences

One assistant superintendent on the Eastern Shore suggested that the regional center also target central office supervisors in training. Supervisors often participate on school teams and have other responsibilities related to SBIDM, but they "sometimes get left out when there are staff development opportunities for administrators and teachers" (ES2).

Enlarging the Regional Center's Mandate

One assistant superintendent discussed the need to enlarge the purview of the regional center. The suggestion was predicated on a perceived need for greater coherence in state initiatives with a staff development component. That coherence could be gained by channeling all such programs through the regional center:

> For example, there's a team at the state right now looking at principals' leadership skills. Instead of them holding their own conferences, which gives us another ball to juggle, they should channel it through the regional center (ES4).

Endnotes

[1]The five informants represented just under half of the total membership of the Eastern Shore steering committee. These informants included two persons who served in equivalent positions to assistant superintendents though without that title.

[2]In the Eastern Shore regional center, the minigrants program was an option for individual school systems. The minigrants enabled a variety of local activities, including follow-ups to regional center training and system-specific support for SBIDM.

Strengths and Needed Improvements in the Prince George's County Regional Center 8

This chapter presents the comments of Prince George's County steering committee members as to strengths and needed improvements in their regional center. These comments were generated in a storyboarding activity with approximately 18 steering committee members. In all, they produced 123 comments on regional center strengths and 76 comments on needed improvements.

These comments are summarized in narrative and tabular form in this chapter. Comments from individual interviews with two assistant superintendents, who also participated in the storyboarding activity, supplement the narrative at various points.

> *At the time of the study, the Prince George's County regional center had concentrated much of its resources in training and materials development related to Dimensions of Learning for school-based and central office personnel throughout the school system. The center also provided alternative types of intensive team development, and had awarded one cycle of minigrants. The center's activities are described more fully on page 3 in the Introduction.*

Strengths of the Prince George's County Regional Center

Members of the steering committee in Prince George's (PG) County were asked to identify "the strengths, benefits, personal or institutional satisfactions, insights, thrills, and good things about the regional centers." Table 10 summarizes their comments.[1]

PG steering committee members weighted three strengths heavily. The first of these referred to improvements in coordinating systemwide reform efforts, underscoring the common elements of diverse school improvement initiatives, and focusing on improvements in instruction. The second of these perceived strengths was the fostering of collaboration generally and specifically in shared decisionmaking and site-based planning at schools. The third major strength was the training, materials, and minigrants, along with other aspects of the conception and/or shaping of the center's staff development offerings. Other strengths noted by the PG steering committee included a focus on outcomes and data, and improved results, especially in terms of personal growth.

Table 10
Prince George's Steering Committee Members' Perceptions of Regional Center Strengths

Strengths	Comments	
	N=123	Per cent
Improves implementation and coordination	37	30.1
Improves shared decisionmaking and involvement	35	28.5
Offers needed programs and products: • Training • Materials • Model staff development • Minigrants	30 14 5 8 3	24.4
Focuses on outcomes and data	15	12.2
Improves results	6	4.9

Improves Implementation and Coordination

The greatest perceived strength for the PG regional center was the extent to which schools were implementing decisions under SBIDM, the school system had aligned its reform efforts, and communication had improved all around. Somewhat under a third of the comments sounded those themes.

PG steering committee members credited the regional center with fostering increases in SBIDM implementation through its training, materials, minigrants, and other means. Sample comments include:

> Systemic growth in Dimensions of Learning.
>
> Growth in various school instructional programs: many are using integrated curricula and writing performance tasks.
>
> School improvement plans which guided instruction.

Steering committee members also noted the ways in which the regional center's activities had prompted coordination or alignment of various reform initiatives within the school system. Their comments suggest that this occurred because the regional center deliberately addressed systemwide direction and made explicit the common principles in disparate programs. Examples of comments in this vein include:

> Global view of what is happening in PG County.
>
> Steering committee was a microcosm of the system.
>
> Catalyst for aligning system initiatives.

Reinforced everything that is a part of the Comer process.

Supported Effective School process.

Provided common direction but with flexibility.

Invaluable opportunity to refocus *entire school system* on components and strategies of SBIDM.

A common understanding of school team decisionmaking process.

Provided a set of operational definitions as a program focus: a "common vocabulary."

One of the assistant superintendents amplified this idea in an interview:

> For PG County, the center is an opportunity to evaluate where we are and what we've done...[The steering committee] gives folks who have to focus on these topics a chance to. It's healthy. It has benefited the system.

Related to increased coordination was improved communication. This improved communication spanned a number of boundaries. Examples include:

Made all parts of the system "talk to one another" in an ongoing, meaningful way.

Encourages dialogue.

Share ideas between schools and individuals.

Networking with other centers and the state.

An assistant superintendent added, "The steering committee gives us an opportunity to discuss things from a school system perspective and to talk about needs."

Improves Shared Decisionmaking and Involvement

Somewhat over a quarter of the comments on regional center strengths related to greater involvement of school-based staff and parents, and increased collaboration in shared decisionmaking and site-based planning. The genuine involvement of staff was especially stressed. Sample comments include:

Learning to share an idea in a school and build on it.

Changing perspective of staff and parents, moving from self-centered to "whole picture."

Increased staff involvement in school improvement efforts.

Working school improvement teams!!!

> Significant difference in the skills of hundreds of people to do *team-based decisionmaking*.
>
> SBIDM is really starting to happen.

Steering committee members also stressed the strength of collaboration and consensus-building within and among teams, as well as others. Examples of comments include:

> Focus on collaboration.
>
> Consensus-driven.
>
> Working as a team; problem-solving together.
>
> Encourages collaborations between and among area offices and central office staff.

Another dimension of this identified strength was systemwide acceptance of SBIDM with school-based needs at its core. Comments include:

> School-based decision being a priority.
>
> SBIDM allows for individual school needs.
>
> Decisions made are varied -- schools can tailor to their individual needs.
>
> Renewed focus upon value and role and school improvement plan as a change variable.

Both assistant superintendents remarked in their interviews on how the regional center had increased staff's awareness, knowledge, and skill for participating in SBIDM. For example:

> Most principals liked the days with the team in the summer. It was a bonus because they weren't running a school while writing plans. It was a big plus.
>
> [W]e've been able to bring teams together for two days. No principal won't say it's great. The [regional center] grant has been a tremendous benefit to the school system: the mini-grants, the Dimensions of Learning training...
>
> Strengths included having an area...resource team to read [school improvement] plans. The team included people from schools...*They* gained from reading a variety of plans.

Offers Needed Programs and Products

About a fourth of the comments identified the regional center's programs and products as strengths. Steering committee members tended to single out either the content or intended audience for training programs as particular strong points. Dimensions of Learning and team building were frequently mentioned in this regard. Sample comments about training strengths include:

> Dimensions of Learning training throughout the system.
>
> Team building at all levels.
>
> Provided school teams with practice needed to become effective team members.
>
> ACE facilitation training for the steering committee and resource teams.

Steering committee members also made special mention of various materials as a strength. Some materials had been created in conjunction with training programs, while others included instruments and manuals. Sample comments include:

> Curricular, instructional, and assessment *products*.
>
> Refinement of Standards of Excellence to include Dimensions of Learning.
>
> Dimensions of Learning as a basis for revising DTA format.

In addition, PG steering committee members cited specific ways in which their regional center's programs embodied exemplary staff development principles or practice. Examples include:

> We followed a natural progression from large, system-level training and planning to major focus on site-level empowerment.
>
> Sharing of ideas on what makes a "good" plan.
>
> Gathering data to assist schools in formulating their plans: either schools pursuing or when need assistance.
>
> Focus on potential instead of limitations; multiple means of getting the same message out; not different stuff but focus on singular and high-quality training.

Both assistant superintendents gave examples of regional center practices that had been emulated in other settings.

> The idea of having someone go through it with principals, helping think through it, is helpful, just as having area staff think things through -- an idea I got from the steering committee -- was helpful to me as an area superintendent.
>
> [The idea behind the minigrant program] became contagious: many schools are now talking to the research office about seeking money to do other things.

The center's minigrant program engendered other favorable comments from steering committee members and the assistant superintendents. One steering committee member stated: "Number of submitted grants showed interest of schools to improve." The assistant superintendents added:

> The minigrants were a good idea, especially for [schools which] have no other sources of money...Some had talked about wanting money to do stuff,

but my substitute and staff development budget is just a little more than $10,000 [for over 30 schools].

The minigrants are another strength. I'm sorry more schools couldn't get them. People really put effort in [to develop their proposals].

Focuses on Outcomes and Data

About an eighth of the comments identified as strengths the regional center's orientation toward outcomes and reliance on data. One strain in the comments was satisfaction that there was an analytical underpinning to planning. Another strain in the comments was that the center's general approach was compatible with national reform movements. Examples include:

Focus/outcomes.

Reaffirmation of value of aggregated and disaggregated data.

Began an important process of collaborative inquiry and introspective analysis.

Strategic planning: long- and short-term.

Consistent with design principles implicit in major national reforms.

Improves Results

A small fraction of the comments on regional center strengths concerned the achievement of learning outcomes. All but one of these comments referred to personal growth for steering committee members: gaining insights and skills, confirming previously-held views, or being enriched in other ways by experiences with the regional center. The remaining comment related to school performance. Sample comments include:

Enabled me to meet new teachers I might never have known.

Reinforced for me the benefit of any team having an outside facilitator.

Enabled real progress to be made toward school system mission and goals in *very* difficult times.

Needed Improvements in the Prince George's County Regional Center

The steering committee also identified needed improvements in the PG regional center. Members were asked to identify "needed improvements, upgrades, adjustments, modifications, and things to make better the regional centers." Altogether, the PG steering committee generated a total of 76 comments. Comments on needed improvements represented somewhat over half (62 per cent) of the number of comments on strengths.

The greatest identified need was for adjustments to programs and products. PG steering committee members next most frequently identified the need for more time. The remaining five areas for modification were mentioned with almost equal frequency. These were needs for more

money, more communication and involvement, and more monitoring and evaluation, along with desired changes in local and state policies, and last, changes in procedures or activities.

Table 11 summarizes steering committee members' comments on needed improvements.[2]

More Programs and Products

Close to a third of steering committee comments indicated a need to modify the regional center's programs and products. The vast majority of these comments had to do with training, especially who should receive training or the type of training to be offered. Many groups were named to receive more (or some) training, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents and communities, the board of education, and the steering committee itself. Comments about the type of training mainly pointed to the need for an increase or intensification of what was already offered, new emphases within those offerings, or, rarely, altogether new offerings. Sample comments include:

> More team development for teams which need it (renewal).
>
> More activities and orientation for parents and communities.
>
> Expand Dimensions training to more teachers in *all* buildings.
>
> Provide day-long workshops on how to collect and use *all* sorts of data.
>
> ...[F]ocus on school-based training, customizing.

One of the assistant superintendents also made a recommendation in this area. This individual proposed looking at "new principals' teams as automatic candidates for intensive team training."

Steering committee members also commented on the need for modifications or additions to the regional center's stock of materials, minigrants, or approaches to staff development. Sample comments include:

> Produce an anthology of SBIDM products: plans, assessment tools, reflective journals, etc.
>
> # of grants.
>
> Ways to share school plans.
>
> Establish more training technologies.

More Time

The need for more time captured over one-fifth of the steering committee's comments. Most of these comments centered on more time for various stakeholders to plan, be trained, develop grants, and other activities. A small number of comments discussed timing, specifically the need to offer training during the summer. Selected comments about the need for more time include:

Table 11
Prince George's Steering Committee Members' Perceptions of Needed Improvements in the Regional Center

Needed Improvements	Comments	
	N=76	Per cent
More programs and products: • Training • Minigrants • Materials • Model staff development	23 16 3 2 2	30.3
More time	16	21.1
More money	9	11.8
More communication and involvement	8	10.5
Changes in local and state policies	7	9.2
More monitoring and evaluation	7	9.2
Changes in procedures or activities	6	7.9

Time to develop what is needed.

Provide more time for school-based teams to plan.

Ways to get more schools involved in Dimensions of Learning; more training time.

Time to develop and process.

Time to do more.

One of the assistant superintendents added that teams "need continuous training. Two days don't take the place of that training."

More Money

The need for more funding accounted for almost an eighth of the comments. Time and money were linked in a number of comments. Others stressed the need for funding to keep up the momentum for change. Sample comments include:

Always need more "time" and "resources."

Ways to find more grant money for team building.

> SBIDM, at its heart, requires greatly expanded emphasis on EQUITY of resource allocation. Changing a 115,000-student system takes a lot more effort and resources than a 10,000-student LEA.
>
> Continue process; more $$.

More Communication and Involvement

The need for even more communication and involvement emerged in just over one-tenth of steering committee members' comments. The emphasis was on greater communication with respect to clarification of key concepts, wider publicity, and networking to steering committee members. Greater involvement had to do with broadening inclusion both at schools and throughout the system. Sample comments include:

> Create a visual showing connections: SBIDM, Effective Schools, Comer School Development Process, School-based Management.
>
> Even greater publicity...
>
> At the schoolhouse level, how to get everyone involved so that they feel a part of the school improvement movement.
>
> Everyone in system must *model* what we ask of teachers and schools.

Changes in Local and State Policies

Just under one-tenth of the comments amounted to desired changes in state or local school system policies on SBIDM and the regional center. Most of these desired changes were at the state level. The following selected comments illustrate:

> Establishing no-fault [evaluations] for principals who support SBIDM.
>
> STILL...the trickle-down process prevails when dealing with prescribed outcomes.
>
> Needed more clarity from MSDE re: groundrules, expectations, ways to access funding in a timely manner.
>
> Dimensions of Learning is *not* an inoculation process. It is ongoing as a process of school reform. No one at MSDE should be in a position to say, "*When* are they going to finish with Dimensions?"

More Monitoring and Evaluation

Another one-tenth of the comments discussed the need for more monitoring and evaluation. Among other things, these comments called for better monitoring of short- and long- term goals, and acting on the information. Selected comments include:

> Monitoring -- short-term, long-term, making adjustments if needed.
>
> Plan as a living document.

More celebration of accomplishments.

Trainer of trainer model: revisit, follow-up.

Changes in Procedures or Activities

Finally, about one-twelfth of steering committee comments addressed needs for change in assorted procedures, activities, or other aspects of management of the regional centers. These comments mostly clustered around the perceived need for more information about promising practices and programs, especially from the other regional centers. Sample comments include:

More direct interaction with regions.

Regional center sharing of "what works."

Give [the coordinator] more staff.

Endnotes

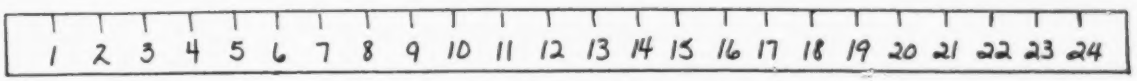
[1]Steering committee members contributed 112 response cards. There were 112 codable response cards which accounted for 123.

[2]Participants contributed a total of 67 response cards. There were 66 codable response cards which accounted for a total of 76 comments.

Autonomy

Greater Self-rule

Before - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12



- After

Sofia Buzz Bill

Terry Kitten

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Part III: Conclusion

Summary and Reflections 9

This chapter summarizes findings and offers reflections on a study of school-based instructional decisionmaking (SBIDM) and the regional staff development centers for SBIDM in Maryland. The study examined the implementation of SBIDM in the centers' service area, perceptions of SBIDM, and perceptions of the regional centers.

Study questions were largely derived from indicators which the regional centers had collaboratively developed. They, in turn, were derived from general principles promulgated by the Maryland State Department of Education. Study questions consisted of the following.

- To what extent is SBIDM being implemented in the regional centers' area?
- What is the local school system context for SBIDM?
- What are stakeholders' perceptions about the quality and utility of school improvement plans?
- What are stakeholders' perceptions about the extent to which SBIDM is being implemented?
- What do stakeholders perceive to be the strengths and needed improvements in SBIDM?
- What do stakeholders perceive to be the strengths and improvements needed in the regional centers?

Informants included school teams, principals, selected others on the teams, and other faculty in seven schools, as well as assistant superintendents and regional centers' steering committees. The seven study schools were located in three Eastern Shore school systems and four administrative areas within Prince George's County. Assistant superintendents represented five Eastern Shore school systems and two administrative areas in Prince George's County. Steering committees in Baltimore City and Prince George's County included teachers, principals, other school-based staff, central office and area administrators, regional center coordinators, and others.

Data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, and a group process adapted from storyboarding. These methods are described elsewhere in the body of this report. In all, over 180 people provided information for the study.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part summarizes findings in the implementation of SBIDM. The second part summarizes findings in perceptions of SBIDM. The third part summarizes perceptions of the regional centers. The last part presents reflections on how well SBIDM and the regional centers in Maryland met theoretical conditions for successful school-based management.

Implementation of SBIDM

Taken together, the findings suggest that SBIDM was well under way in the regional centers' service area. In broad strokes:

- School improvement teams were universally in place. These teams worked collaboratively to reach decisions, with principals playing a special role.
- All teams involved other groups in their deliberations and planning, albeit in highly idiosyncratic ways. Other staff -- especially professional staff -- were most involved. Support staff, parents, and community were generally less involved, if at all.
- All schools produced improvement plans. These plans usually reflected state and local goals. However, data informed planning unevenly across the schools. While all schools consulted a variety of data sources, they differed in the extent to which that information influenced their determination of specific targets (if they set targets) or their selection of activities.
- Schools generally implemented their plans. However, school-based monitoring of implementation was usually informal and tended to be modest. Similarly, schools, with notable exceptions, attended to evaluation and adjusted their plans only as they labored to produce the next annual improvement plan.

Local school system context affected SBIDM in various ways. These included delimiting the types of decisions schools could make, requiring schools to conform to guidelines for plan content and format, and controlling resources. School systems also influenced SBIDM through their routine supervision of principals, whom they held accountable for school performance.

The following sections elaborate these findings on SBIDM implementation.

School Improvement Teams

The study confirmed that there were functioning improvement teams in all schools. The membership of these groups consisted mostly of teachers and almost all included at least minimal representation from parents. All held meetings, conducted business, and produced annual school improvement plans.

However, the teams varied in almost every other respect. For example, they went by different names. They were different sizes, although most seemed to represent about one-fourth to one-third of the staff. They used different processes to select their membership, and might or might not have fixed terms for members. The frequency, duration, and location of their meetings also varied. Several teams met once or twice a month for 45 minutes before or after school at school, but others deviated from this schedule.

Some of the differences across teams can be attributed to differences in local school system guidelines about team composition.[1] In most school systems, principals, especially in extremely small schools, could override local guidelines on team size. The situation was less clear as to the stated requirement in a few systems for central office representation on each team. Although the central office informants did not indicate that this fell within a principal's zone of discretion, the study found scant evidence of direct central office participation on teams.

Principal's Role

The study revealed that principals played a unique and critical role on all teams. Principals shared with teams pertinent, specialized information to which their position gave them access. In just

over half the schools, they also acted as the team's chief or sole convenor, moderator, and/or facilitator (doing so at the team's invitation in half of those). Performing these functions did not preclude most principals' behaving like a "member, not leader" of the team. This meant that they contributed ideas on a par with other team members and refrained from dominating discussion and manipulating decisionmaking.

Team members in almost all the schools considered this role to be clear and appropriate. However, central office supervisors also had expectations for principals which could potentially interfere with what team members felt to be a principal's appropriate role. Moreover, central office supervisors had the power, through their routine supervision of principals, to enforce their expectations. They sometimes exercised this power by vetoing a principal's and/or a school's improvement objectives. Some principals complained about this central office prerogative as a contradiction of SBIDM. Somewhat curiously, team members in some of the affected schools did not seem aware of it. The explanation may be that principals in this situation had found ways to buffer their schools from external forces.[2]

Structure and Organization of School Decisionmaking

The study confirmed that teams involved others in the development of improvement plans and other decisions. However, teams involved other staff, especially professional staff, more consistently and successfully than they involved parents and other groups. Staff were typically involved through their membership on various groups, whether *ad hoc* bodies constituted expressly for the school improvement team or established bodies such as grade-level groups, subject-matter departments, standing committees, and the faculty as a whole.

School teams were on their own in terms of which of these groups to involve when, how many iterations to go through, and where definitive decisionmaking authority lay. Whether by accident or design, by custom or accretion, they responded by developing largely idiosyncratic decisionmaking processes. These processes appeared to be embedded in complex communications networks which were unique to each school.

Tracking these processes in some schools proved difficult for outsiders, due to the number of groups involved and overlaps in their nomenclature or membership. Participants experienced no such difficulty. They were perfectly clear about the decisionmaking role of the various teams, committees, subcommittees, wings, clusters, councils, and other groups.

Several common principles emerge from the clutter of the highly individuated processes.

- Multiple groups in each school are involved in decisionmaking. SBIDM is not the province of school improvement teams alone.
- The decisionmaking process is iterative, not linear. Discrete decisions and improvement plans, which are composed of many smaller and interrelated decisions, cycle through stakeholder groups more than once.
- The degree of complexity and controversy determines the number of iterations. The more complex or controversial a decision, the more iterations and the greater number of groups

involved. However, the amount of time available may affect the number of iterations, with a pressing decision undergoing fewer iterations or involving fewer groups.

Decisionmaking Strategies

Teams used a variety of deliberative and analytical techniques in their own meetings and their dealings with other staff groups. Within team meetings, there was plenty of talk, questioning, and ultimately, decisionmaking. Small group work (e.g., segmenting a problem, cooperative learning), brainstorming, and round robin were most frequently mentioned as helpful group process techniques. In their dealings with other staff groups, teams also used gallery walks, food and fun, and force-field analysis. They had discovered and practiced a number of these techniques during regional centers training.

Six teams said they also used consensus, but the term had divergent meanings across and even within schools. On the one hand, consensus denoted a technique for reaching agreement at a point in time without voting. On the other, it denoted a protracted, inclusive process of consultation for exploring issues long enough and widely enough to generate broad acceptance for a particular solution or point of view. In this context, consensus and voting could and did coexist.

Support of decisions. Team members supported team decisions once they were made. The explanation for this happy phenomenon has several facets. In most schools, the consensual process of reaching the decision -- that is, seeing the decisionmaking process as incomplete until there was general acceptance of the decision -- ensured that team members and others already supported it. Some teams checked explicitly for all members' support as a condition of counting the decision as made. Universal acknowledgement that members "could live with" the decision signaled that a vote could be taken or that the matter was thereby settled.

Another facet of the explanation is that team members in most schools were responsible for acting as ambassadors or liaisons to other staff to explain the team's decisions. This role did not necessarily include persuading colleagues to accept a decision, but rather describing the decision process and factors pertinent to the decision, and answering questions about it. Enough resistance (e.g., questions or objections from team members' constituents) at this phase of reporting out could cause a team to reopen discussion and revisit their decision.

Improvement Plans

The study confirmed that schools in the regional centers' area had produced improvement plans as the state required.[3] Common elements in improvement plans were descriptions of activities, responsible parties, timeline, and methods of evaluation. In some instances, plans also contained statements of goals and supporting performance data.

Goals and data. Teams and other staff were aware of state priorities, especially in the areas of attendance and achievement. These priorities were addressed directly in most school plans, along with other school system and school-specific goals. However, the specificity of the goals and the link between them and activities varied across the schools.

By the time they were approved, the plans also included local school system priorities where these were required or strongly suggested. The priorities of local school systems in the study tended to reiterate selected state standards or to complement them with additional local measures. An example of reiteration was a local goal to meet state standards for satisfactory performance in elementary achievement and in secondary attendance. Examples of complementary goals included parent attendance at teacher conferences, student completion of Algebra 1, improvement in student behavior, and the infusion of multicultural education. Some individual schools also adopted goals. Examples had to do with climate, parent involvement, development of interdisciplinary curricula and instruction, and infusion of thinking.

Team members and other staff in almost all the study schools were at least aware of their performance on the state's indicators. Most took note of these data in their improvement planning. However, schools varied on the extent to which they integrated the examination of state or local data into substantive improvement planning. A few had developed elaborate materials and/or activities which they used to engage all staff in comprehensive examinations of pertinent data. The data they included went well beyond those included in the state's or their school system's set of indicators.

All the schools had examined some data beyond those embodied in state priorities. Additional data sources included grade distributions, grade-point averages, honor roll attainment, reading levels, achievement on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), surveys of staff, students, and parent satisfaction, office referrals, and suspension rates. Some of these had been required or suggested by school systems in relation to local priorities, but others were included because individual schools felt they were important.

Implementation of Plans. Principals, other team members, and assistant superintendents attested that schools usually carried out the activities described in their improvement plans. There are at least four possible explanations for this high degree of implementation. One is that the lengthy and sometimes contentious planning process had anticipated or eliminated implementation problems. Another possible explanation is that many activities in the plans were fairly modest in scope and complexity. Still another possible explanation is that improvement plans so focused school attention and energy that there were few rival agendas or competing demands. Yet another possible explanation is that the existence of a public document enumerating action steps made it relatively easy to take those steps. The truth may partake of all these explanations.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Plans. School staff and assistant superintendents also attested to the fact that monitoring and evaluation of plans were among the least developed areas in their current SBIDM practice. Monitoring of plan implementation at schools tended to be informal. Formal evaluation of effects was typically not addressed until the time came to revise plans for the next year.

Exceptions to this generalization were found in one or two of the study schools. In one high school, updates of the comprehensive data booklet on which departmental and schoolwide planning was based were constantly put before the faculty, discussed, and acted on.

This is not to say that most schools neglected to act on problems that arose in the course of the year. Many spent a great deal of time responding to various problems and issues through their

SBIDM procedures. However, their treatment of problems of all sorts did not necessarily relate to the school plan nor make use of systematic information about implementation or effects.

Local School System Context

School systems had policies or guidelines in place that governed various stakeholders' decisionmaking authority and regulated some of the mechanics related to school improvement planning. The scope, formality, and degree of attention to SBIDM and school improvement planning varied across school systems. Over time, these elements had also varied within school systems and altered the relative amounts of regulation, standardization, and oversight school systems imposed. Some school systems which had started out with stringent regulations had relaxed them, while others with looser rules initially had tightened them.

The school systems for four of the study's seven schools had issued guidelines delineating the kinds of decisions schools could make under SBIDM as opposed to decisions to be made by central offices and other stakeholders. On the one hand, guidelines about the allocation of decisionmaking authority tended to be general and did not concern the dynamics of decisionmaking within teams or within schools. On the other had, some school systems specified procedures for teams to follow in reporting their deliberations.[4]

In contrast, all school systems concerned themselves with school improvement plans. Central offices typically regulated some aspects of plan format and content, conducted reviews, and accepted or rejected plans. The specifics as to the format and content of plans varied across school systems. A few preprinted goals and/or data on the forms schools were expected to use for their plans. Central offices tolerated deviations in format with varying amounts of consternation, depending on the school system.

The specifics of plan reviews also varied across school systems. The timing, who was involved, what was inspected, the rigor of the inspection, links to the formal system of principal supervision, and type and amount of feedback all differed. Principals and other team members tended to say that they had received relatively little feedback from the central office, and that sometimes the feedback was too long in coming.

When it was provided, feedback was most often directed to the principal either in person or in writing. Some school systems had considered or had tried face-to-face encounters with teams to discuss their plans, but were discouraged by the requisite time commitment. Feedback in the plan review process could include commendations or directions for revision. Revisions requested of the study schools, if any, usually centered on fuller inclusion of school system priorities.

Central office staff sometimes also channeled assistance to schools based on needs they discerned in reviewing plans or subsequent monitoring of implementation. This assistance could take the form of technical assistance (to the principal, the team, or other faculty) and/or additional resources.

Perceptions of SBIDM

Study findings suggest stakeholders perceived that they and their schools had reaped a number of significant benefits from SBIDM. In broad strokes:

- At this stage of SBIDM implementation, the improvement planning process and the plan provided most of the benefits. Outcomes such as increased student achievement had not yet been realized.
- Stakeholders perceived school improvement plans to be substantive and useful. Assistant superintendents who reviewed them declared themselves on the whole satisfied with the quality of improvement plans.
- Team members rated their schools as having achieved or being on the way to achieving full implementation of SBIDM. Teams in the high schools rated their schools relatively lower than other schools as to SBIDM implementation.
- In all schools, perceptions of strengths clearly outweighed perceptions of the need for improvements in SBIDM. Perceived strengths and needs both addressed issues related to school improvement and stakeholder involvement.

The following sections elaborate on these findings.

Quality and Utility of Plans

Assistant superintendents indicated that improvement plans, on the whole, were adequate and getting better. Several characterized most plans as good, a few as poor, and a very few as outstanding. Several expressed their judgment in terms of a grade in the "B" range. Plans were generally "functional and usable," said one. Said another: "They're not as good as they're going to be in a few years. Are they where we would want them to be at this point in time? Yes."

Several assistant superintendents based their judgments on the plans' "depth" and "focus." Good plans addressed substantive issues and thought them through well. Good plans were selective and judicious about the activities they included, avoiding the pitfall of being "packed with unrelated stuff." Good plans also isolated root causes and targeted major changes in instruction.

Team members and other school staff in the study declared their plans to be useful guides to school improvement. These informants could all describe one or more specific features of their plans. Even though in some schools they indicated that a small minority of their colleagues paid scant attention to the plans from one year to the next, they, like the assistant superintendents, valued the plans for bringing "focus" to improvement efforts.

These team members and other school staff explained that improvement plans and the planning process helped them focus on:

- **What was important in the school environment.** The plans defined clear targets and specified the efforts which were to be directed toward them.
- **Schoolwide perspective.** Plans created a common language for taking a schoolwide view, and put schoolwide issues in the school's public domain.

- **Real data.** Plans and the planning process made information about school performance accessible and available to everyone. Everyone could see and agree on schools' strengths and weaknesses.
- **Rationale for school mission.** Some plans made their improvement logic explicit by laying out data, needs, goals, activities, and evaluation strategies. These plans clarified not only what the school was going to do, but also why.
- **Commitment.** The plans kept the goals and activities in front of staff. This had an energizing effect, if only by reminding staff of their intention to act.

For all of this, team members and other staff still regarded school improvement plans as flexible and subject to revision. Plans were understood to be flexible in that they guided but did not constrain individual judgment. Moreover, plans were expected to change, even within the year-long planning cycle, if need be.

Several assistant superintendents and team members identified particular areas where plans needed strengthening. Assistant superintendents looked for plans in the future to demonstrate use of more meaningful data, better prioritizing, better-calibrated amounts of "challenge," and greater sophistication in measuring progress. Team members pointed to a need for more quality time in the planning process and attention to more problems, given the many problems schools faced.

Status of SBIDM

All the study schools had achieved full implementation of SBIDM or were on the way, according to ratings by selected team members. Specifically, they were asked if their school was "there," "on the way there," or "far from there." Team members within schools tended to agree on their ratings.

Two schools, a middle and a special center, unanimously rated themselves as "there." They explained their rating in terms of the commitment and cohesion of staff, and the fact that their improvement plans were being implemented. They said that that their principals supported shared decisionmaking in word and deed, and that everyone had a voice in decisionmaking. Collaboration in carrying out decisions was also a feature in these schools.

These schools' judgment about fully implementing SBIDM did not preclude acknowledging ways in which they fell short of the ideal. Perceived shortcomings included less than satisfactory parent involvement in one and central office support in the other. Their expectation was that SBIDM was developmental. As one principal put it: "There's always room for improvement in the process as we learn, but for our school, it's working very well."

The other five schools rated themselves as somewhere "on the way" to full SBIDM implementation. All noted some pluses, such as staff involvement and principals' support of shared decisionmaking. They also noted minuses, for example, in terms of uncertainty about what SBIDM was supposed to be, a sense of less than complete staff commitment, or the team's lack of problem-solving skill.

The high schools in the study gave themselves the lowest relative rating of all the schools. Although they, too, saw themselves on the way to implementing SBIDM, they cited a number of

unmet SBIDM needs. These included the need for training, ideas, resources, and parent involvement.

SBIDM Strengths

Team members identified the strengths, benefits, and other good things about the practice or concept of SBIDM in their schools. Their comments indicated that SBIDM enabled school improvement and stakeholder involvement by having:

- **Improved commitment.** One-fifth of team members' comments indicated that SBIDM increased cohesion and collaboration among staff and other stakeholders. SBIDM promoted "buy-in" and ownership over problems and solutions.
- **Improved ideas.** Just under one-fifth of team members' comments indicated that SBIDM was the means of bringing together diverse perspectives from around the school and bringing the great and unexpected richness of individuals' strengths and creativity to bear on school problems.
- **Focused on goals and needs.** About one-seventh of the comments indicated that team members appreciated how SBIDM was oriented to student outcomes and local needs. In Prince George's County, this included the opportunity to link local budgets to these needs.
- **Enhanced self-efficacy.** About one-seventh of the comments indicated that individuals and their ideas were valued and respected under SBIDM.
- **Improved decisions.** About an eighth of the comments indicated that decisions improved under SBIDM because they were based on local needs and were reached through a process that promoted thorough analysis and appropriate consultation. Decisions were also better because participants were open to new ideas.
- **Improved relationships.** Close to one-tenth of team members' comments pointed out that SBIDM strengthened connections between the school and parents and community, as well as among staff from different grades or specialties. Communication increased and improved, even bonding people emotionally to one another in some cases.
- **Improved implementation.** About one-tenth of the comments indicated that decisions were being enacted under SBIDM. SBIDM made implementing decisions more practicable because the broad participation of staff facilitated a more equitable division of labor. Ideas were being tried and changes in instruction could be seen.
- **Improved results and improved understanding about change.** A small number of comments credited SBIDM with the achievement of targeted results at this point. These comments pointed to goals already being met, problems being solved, and benefits to students. A very few comments noted that SBIDM increased staff understanding of the change process.

Needed Improvements in SBIDM

Team members also commented on improvements, changes, and upgrades needed in the practice or concept of SBIDM in their schools. Needed improvements for SBIDM in school improvement and stakeholder involvement were for:

- **More involvement from staff, parents, and students.** Over one-fourth of team members' comments indicated the need for even greater stakeholder involvement. The overwhelming need was for more involvement from staff. Team members wanted to see deeper involvement by more people, greater commitment, and better communication between team members and other staff. They also expressed the need for more parent and student involvement (especially, but not exclusively in high schools).
- **More time.** Close to one-fifth of the comments indicated that teams needed more time for the various aspects of improvement planning. This included sustained, quality time for planning in general, attending to serious problems, and communicating with other staff, as well as a larger window of time for implementing programs. There were also divergent suggestions for the scheduling of meetings.
- **More resources.** About one-sixth of the comments indicated the need for more money, staff, materials, and other instructional resources. These comments were especially pronounced in Prince George's County, where team members were looking for stable sources of funding to carry out their improvement plans.
- **Changes in school system and state policies.** About one-sixth of the comments also indicated the need for more supportive policies from higher authorities. By far the majority of these comments were addressed to local school systems. Team members sought central office statements and actions that comported with SBIDM ideals, including giving schools more genuine authority over curriculum, instruction, and budget, more room for experimentation, and better feedback. The relatively few comments directed to the state wanted greater consideration of local context in the setting of statewide goals and standards.
- **More training.** A small number of comments wanted additional training in SBIDM for those already initiated or training for more people.
- **Changes in SBIDM procedures.** An equally small number of comments identified specific, needed refinements in meeting mechanics or team functioning, such as increasing small group work, role rotation, and follow-through.
- **More ideas.** Another small number of comments spotlighted the need for new ideas and/or greater attention to specific solutions.
- **More data.** An even smaller fraction of the comments indicated the need for more complete data or better data management.

Perceptions of the Regional Centers

Study findings suggest that the strengths of the three regional centers well outnumbered needs for improvement, according to the perceptions of steering committee members. Despite differences in

context and program, the centers were all seen to have played a critical role in providing schools and school systems with much needed support for SBIDM. In broad strokes, the perceived strengths of the regional centers were as follows.

- The regional centers brought high-quality staff development on SBIDM and school improvement within schools' reach. Steering committees celebrated the fact that the centers brought high-caliber trainers and consultants in contact with school teams, principals, and parents. They also indicated that the centers developed and/or made available highly regarded materials and other resources. All of the nearly 500 schools in the centers' area, which covered 11 of Maryland's 24 school systems, participated in one or more ways.
- The regional centers increased the awareness, knowledge, and skills of school-based staff as to SBIDM and school improvement. Steering committees noted that the centers' staff development opportunities kept pace with the needs of the diverse populations they served. Center offerings reflected not only the range of needs across schools, but also the progression of needs within schools. As a consequence, steering committees reported seeing evidence of practitioners' development of awareness, knowledge, and skills.
- The regional centers contributed to the implementation of SBIDM and school improvement efforts. Specifically, steering committees reported gains in the quality of improvement planning, schools' and school systems' clarity about their needs, and their active seeking of resources to meet school improvement needs. Minigrants from the centers also enabled some specific needs to be met. These results constitute significant progress toward the centers' major goal: increased implementation of SBIDM and improvement planning.
- The regional centers also enhanced the capacity of school systems to support school improvement. Steering committees indicated that the centers had helped schools systems by identifying systemwide and school-specific needs, performing assorted staff development planning functions, and facilitating systemwide reflection and coordination of reform efforts. As steering committees saw it, systemwide planning was placed on a stronger footing, resulting in better plans and more complete implementation at the school-system level.

Steering committees cited fewer needs for improvement overall. There were also fewer needs in common across the three centers. The single greatest need for improvement across the three centers was to provide more staff development programs and products for more people. In this regard, individual steering committee members suggested various groups that should receive priority in center programs, including new principals, additional members of school teams, and school boards. Members also suggested disparate topics to be emphasized or added to center offerings. Other needs for improvement that surfaced in two of the three steering committees included calls for more monitoring and evaluation of center programs, such as minigrants, more time for planning, longer runs for programs, and more opportunities for steering committees to network across regions. Needs for broader and more meaningful involvement in SBIDM, and better communication locally were also mentioned by two of the three steering committees.

Steering committee members' perceptions of the strengths and needed improvements are summarized by center in the next three sections.

Baltimore City

Members of Baltimore City's (BC) steering committee identified strengths and needed improvements in the regional centers through storyboarding. The chief perceived strength, noted in almost half of members' comments, was that the center offered needed programs and products. Training programs, especially for parents, but also for teams and cadres, were foremost among these. Training materials and minigrants were also highlighted. Less pronounced but clearly evident were perceptions of the center's strength in focusing on outcomes and data, and improved results, especially in terms of steering committee members' personal growth. Other identified strengths included improvements in shared decisionmaking and involvement, and coordination within the school system.

BC steering committee members identified three major needs for improvements. The greatest perceived need was for more programs and products. Referenced in just over a third of the comments, this need focused mostly on providing more training opportunities (e.g., for teams, paraprofessionals, and the steering committee itself) and to a lesser extent on the content or thrust of future training. The second greatest need was for changes in regional center and/or steering committee procedures. These comments, over one quarter of the total, looked for stronger administrative oversight of planning generally and of the minigrants program particularly. The third greatest need for improvement was for more monitoring and evaluation. Capturing fully another quarter of the comments, this perceived need for improvement had to do with tracking the impact of center programs, using that information in future planning, and reporting needs data back to schools in a timely manner.

Eastern Shore

Five assistant superintendents who were members of the Eastern Shore (ES) steering committee identified in individual interviews their perceptions of the strengths and improvements needed in their regional center. These strengths fell into two complementary categories. One describes the center's impact on schools' capacity for SBIDM and school improvement. Specifically, the assistant superintendents ascribed to the regional center increases in practitioners' awareness, knowledge, and skill in SBIDM, and increases in the incidence of SBIDM in their schools. The other category describes the center's impact on school systems' capacity to support school improvement. The assistant superintendents considered the center's greatest contribution to be making fiscal resources available for staff development. The center's lesser, but still significant contributions to school system capacity included the ongoing identification of needs, provision of access to high-quality human resources, and direct support and assistance to local leadership.

These assistant superintendents indicated very few needs for improvement in their regional center. Most can be characterized as various aspects of more training. These consisted of suggestions for more topics (e.g., evaluation and the design of staff development), longer runs for staff development programs, and giving priority to certain groups (e.g., principals) or extending training opportunities to others (e.g., central office supervisors). One comment in a different vein

altogether recommended enlarging the regional center's mandate from SBIDM alone to any and all of the staff development necessitated by new state initiatives.

Prince George's County

As in Baltimore City, members of the Prince George's (PG) County steering committee identified strengths and needed improvements through storyboarding. They identified three major strengths of their regional center, each cited in over one quarter of the comments. The first referred to ways in which the center had contributed to improved systemwide coordination and implementation of reform. These contributions included improved communication and clarity about reform principles at the system level, and changes in practice at the school level. The second of the perceived strengths related to increases in shared decisionmaking and involvement, with some steering committee members seeing SBIDM at long last in actual practice in their school system. The third of these major strengths lay in the regional center's offering of needed programs and products. Included in this category was the center's use of exemplary models of staff development planning and delivery. Other strengths that steering committee members identified were the center's focus on outcomes and needs, and the center's contribution to personal growth and satisfaction for steering committee members.

PG's steering committee identified two major areas of need for improvement and several minor ones. The greatest perceived need was for adjustments to programs and products, mostly to expand programming. Specifics varied, but these suggestions for improvement related to who should receive training, what should be emphasized in training, and which approaches and/or materials should be used. The other major need for improvement concerned time: more time for various stakeholders to plan, be trained, develop grants, and "do more." The need for sustained, quality time for teams to work also surfaced here. Other perceived needs included more money, more communication and involvement within the school system, and more support for SBIDM principles -- in word and deed -- from state and local authorities.

Reflections

Given these findings, it may be instructive now to reflect briefly on Maryland's experience with SBIDM and the regional centers. The literature on decentralization, shared decisionmaking, and school-based management suggests the central issues such a reflection should consider. These issues are conveniently summarized in a theoretical piece by Wohlstetter and Odden (1992).

Wohlstetter and Odden outline the major conditions that must be in place for school-based management (SBM) to work. These conditions include linking SBM to school performance outcomes; giving schools "real" decisionmaking power, "an aggressive staff development process," and comprehensive data; creating a new organizational culture; and getting support and backing from district and school leadership. Although there are differences between Wohlstetter and Odden's SBM and Maryland's SBIDM, primarily in scope, many of the same issues apply to both.

The findings of this study provide evidence that Maryland has met the majority of these conditions in the regional centers' service area. Each condition is discussed below as it was found in the regional centers' service area. A short concluding statement ends this reflection and the chapter.

Links to School Performance Outcomes

MSDE linked SBIDM to school performance by establishing SBIDM within the Maryland School Performance Program. Improvement team members and other faculty are fully aware of expected state (and local) outcomes, in part because they figure prominently in school performance reports that are published annually. This awareness does not necessarily mean that the goals are an integral part of school improvement planning, however. Some factors which appear to influence that linkage include the extent to which staff feel comfortable and competent in handling and interpreting data, are knowledgeable about alternative programs and their effects, and are encouraged to make explicit the logical connections among goals, data, and activities.

Decisionmaking Power

Schools in the regional centers' service area have a measure of real decisionmaking power. This power is vested in school improvement teams, which are everywhere in place. These teams orchestrate decisionmaking on improvement planning and other important school issues. Other professional staff especially share in various stages of decisionmaking.

Maryland schools as a rule do not approach the full measure of power theorized by Hentschke (1988, cited in Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992) in which schools have full authority over hiring, utilities, and substitute funds, for example. Moreover, as this study has illustrated, their decisionmaking power is somewhat curtailed by budgetary constraints in most schools and by central office oversight in some. Schools' lack of experience and skill to utilize fully the power they do have also imposes some limitations on "real" power.

Aggressive Staff Development

The regional centers represent in concept and, to varying degrees, in actuality a critical component of the "aggressive staff development process" that Wohlstetter and Odden recommend. The centers fulfill the recommended requirement that this process be school-based in that they systematically and continuously assess needs, and provide opportunities, through minigrants and the technical assistance associated with intensive team training, for school teams to target school-specific needs.

The potential for meeting this condition has probably been realized to the greatest extent on the Eastern Shore. That regional center serves just 130 schools. As a consequence, many schools on the Shore have been able to partake of multiple offerings from the regional centers. Moreover, the assistant superintendents who make up the Eastern Shore steering committee are able to ensure that the center's regional offerings and local offerings are compatible with each other and with their local priorities. In addition (and almost ironically), the relative paucity of other staff development

opportunities on the Shore has shielded schools from the distraction and confusion of training directed to other, seemingly-competing reforms.

The Prince George's County and Baltimore City regional centers have realized to some extent their potential for meeting this condition. Both have found some means to overcome the problems of large size, limited funding, and competing agendas within their school systems.[5] The Prince George's County regional center has managed to bring coherence at a system level to disparate staff development efforts associated with numerous and apparently unrelated reforms. The steering committee's coordination and alignment of these reforms systemwide comprise an important step toward eliminating the mixed signals that Wohlstetter and Odden identify as a barrier to making SBM work. In Baltimore City, the center has tried various strategies to stretch the number of schools and audiences it can serve meaningfully. The centerpiece of that effort at one time was equipping resident professional development cadres for each school improvement team.

Comprehensive Data

Schools in the regional centers' service area appear to have access to adequate data for improvement planning. As noted above, skills for using available data to the fullest are unevenly spread across schools. Developing greater sophistication in interpreting the data they have and in determining other data that might be useful constitutes a continuing need in most schools. Related needs are for greater understanding of evaluation, as well as increased familiarity and facility in using a range of evaluation techniques to monitor implementation and assess progress on goals.

New Organizational Culture

Schools and school systems in the regional centers' service area have come a long way toward creating a new organizational culture that comports with SBIDM. As Weiss and her colleagues (1991, p.15) point out:

> What is needed is more than a change in formal structure; it is a change in the culture of the school as well. The values of staff, their expectations for themselves and each other, have to undergo a parallel transformation.

This study has provided some evidence for the establishment of the new culture Weiss describes. Teams and their colleagues commented on a new sense of ownership, empowerment, and commitment, a new awareness of schoolwide concerns, new relationships, and new appreciation of each other's creativity. Staff have embraced needs-based, outcomes-focused planning, and can already see changes in their school programs. In short, staff like the new culture of SBIDM. As one principal put it, "This is the way it's supposed to be."

School Support

Wohlstetter and Odden's last condition for successful SBM is support from school and district leadership. This study has shown that principals support SBIDM. All embrace the concept and most honor it in practice most of the time. As a new principal said, "The former administration said, 'Let

me hear your thoughts,' but the principal made a separate decision...There was a team and a plan, but not much SBIDM...Now folks feel they have a say, so now there's more SBIDM."

However, principals' *de facto* ability to support or control SBIDM is bounded by obligations to their central office supervisors. Both principals' obligations to satisfy central office supervisors and their access to special information place them in a unique and somewhat unequal position relative to their colleagues on improvement teams. Team members' tacit acceptance of the principal's privileged position may strengthen the contention that teachers and others self-censor to some degree even in the best of circumstances, in order to operate in a "zone of acceptability" (Weiss, 1992, p.31; also Malen *et al.*, 1990).

School System Support

The study documents school systems' influence on SBIDM. Whether this influence constitutes support or interference may depend on one's point of view. There is no argument about the value and the potential payoff for SBIDM, even from central office administrators who may initially have been reluctant to endorse it. As one said: "Nothing about this experience would cause me to say this is bad. It's the opposite. It's a good idea...How can you guarantee we'll get better performance? It's a risk-taking venture." At the same time, central offices inherently limit SBIDM. They limit it either by defining schools' space for decisionmaking or maintaining ultimate veto power over school decisions, a phenomenon the SBIDM literature documents.

Conclusion

This brief analysis suggests that Maryland's experience with SBIDM and the regional centers matches to a large extent the theory about what it takes for school-based management to work. SBIDM is being implemented. It is taking hold where it was not before. As an assistant superintendent on the Eastern Shore asserted: "I wouldn't even call it 'change' because it never existed prior to this. It's a total change." The regional centers are providing services to support SBIDM, advancing SBIDM even where it already had begun to take hold. According to an assistant superintendent in Prince George's County:

> I wouldn't have guessed I'd be saying this. My attitude was, we've *been* doing this. Why do we need this [regional center]? But the more we talked *et cetera*, the more people saw the need. It's good.

In summary, the study findings described in this report provide evidence that Maryland's schools and school systems are working toward school improvement through SBIDM with the help of the regional centers. The report indicates strengths and needs for improvement in SBIDM and the centers from the perspective of various stakeholders. To the extent that the regional centers, schools, school systems, and MSDE can build on strengths and meet the needs, they are likely to be able to show the gains in school performance for which SBIDM was instituted.

Endnotes

[1]The relatively autonomous administrative areas within Prince George's County are referred to as school systems.

[2]This explanation may also account for the discrepancy between some systems' requirements for central office representation on teams and the apparent lack of such representation in some schools.

[3]This statement refers to the Eastern Shore and Prince George's County whose school teams and other staff and/or assistant superintendents provided information for the study. Information about SBIDM implementation was not collected from Baltimore City.

[4]For example, three of the seven schools referred to directives regarding the minutes of team meetings. Minutes were to be posted, distributed to staff, and/or submitted to the central office, depending on the school system.

[5]The Baltimore City and Prince George's County regional centers serve almost 200 schools each with funding that amounts to about half that allocated to the Eastern Shore.

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